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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Confusion at state level: Kharge on K'taka power tussle

KALABURAGI, 21 DEC

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Sunday said that the confusion over the leadership issue in the State unit exists only at the local level and not within the party High Command. Speaking to reporters in Kalaburagi on Sunday, Kharge said, "The High Command hasn't created any confusion. It exists at the local level." "How is it right to put the blame on the high command?" he asked. His comments come amid an alleged power struggle between Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. *—PTI*

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PHOTO: FREEPIK

7 Indians rescued from cyber slavery in Myanmar

THANE, 21 DEC

Seven people held as "cyber slaves" in Myanmar and forced to carry out international financial frauds have been rescued and brought back to India following a probe by the Mira Bhayandar Vasai Virar (MBVV) crime branch, a senior official said. According to the official, they were held at KK Park, a "scam centre" in Myawaddy Township in Myanmar. "A probe began after Mira Road residents Syed Irtiis Fazal Abbas Hussain and Ammar Aslam Lakdawala managed to return and file a complaint at Nayanagar police station. The duo revealed they were lured by acquaintances Asif Khan and Adnan Sheikh with promises of jobs in Bangkok between July and September 2025. However, they were taken to Myanmar," Assistant Commissioner of Police Madan Ballal said adding that they were handed over to three persons identified as Steve, Anna, and Leo at a company called UU8. *—PTI*

Kerala lynching victim's kin seeks Rs 25 lakh aid

PALAKKAD, 21 DEC

The family of the victim in an alleged mob lynching incident here has demanded compensation of Rs 25 lakh, besides an investigation under stringent provisions of the law, including the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The brother of the 31-year-old victim, Ramnarayan Bhayar, told reporters on Sunday that they would not accept the body until their demands are met. "My brother has two children. Our demand to the Kerala government is to provide compensation of Rs 25 lakh," he said. Police said the post-mortem has been completed and the body is kept at the mortuary of a government hospital. Bhayar, who hailed from Chattisgarh, was allegedly beaten to death on Wednesday evening after being accused of involvement in a theft at Kizhakeattappallam near Walayar. *—PTI*

INDIA SUSPENDS VISA CENTRES IN BANGLADESH

This was after stone pelting at a centre in Chattogram

DHAKA/NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

India on Sunday suspended visa operations at the Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Chattogram until further notice amid heightened tensions in Bangladesh following the killing of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi and subsequent attacks on Indian diplomatic premises.

The suspension followed a security incident at the Assistant High Commission of India (AHCI) in Chattogram, where stone-pelting was reported last week. "Due to the recent security incident, Indian visa operations at IVAC Chattogram will remain suspended from December 21 until further notice," IVAC said, adding that reopening would be reviewed based on the situation. India operates five IVACs in Bangladesh; centres in Dhaka, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Khulna remain operational.

Hadi, 32, a prominent leader of last year's student-led protests that led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government, was shot during an election campaign in Dhaka on 12 December and died in Singapore on Thursday. His killing triggered widespread violence and vandalism, including attacks targeting Indian interests. Tens of thousands attended his funeral on Saturday, where anti-India slogans were raised.

Security was tightened at Indian facilities in Sylhet on 20 December, with Bangladeshi police saying measures were taken to prevent third-party exploitation of the unrest.

Meanwhile, in New Delhi, India rejected as "misleading propaganda" reports in sections of the Bangladeshi media claiming that a protest outside the Bangladesh High Commission created a security threat. The Ministry of External Affairs said 20–25 youths briefly gathered on Saturday to protest the lynching of Dipu Chandra Das, a 25-year-old Hindu man killed in Bangladesh's Mymensingh, and to demand protection for minorities.

"There was no attempt to breach security or the perimeter," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, adding that police dispersed the group within minutes and visual evidence was publicly available. India urged Dhaka's interim government to bring the perpetrators to justice and said it remains in close touch with Bangladeshi authorities amid the evolving situation. *—PTI*

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Student leader Sharif Osman Hadi's (inset) killing triggered widespread violence and vandalism, including attacks targeting Indian interests in Bangladesh **PHOTO: PTI**

- Bangladesh rejected India's comments over "Hindu extremists" demonstration in front of its high commission in New Delhi.

Train fares to get pricier from 26 Dec

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The Railway Ministry has hiked train tickets by 1 paise per km for ordinary class for journeys beyond 215 km, and 2 paise per km for non-AC classes of mail/express trains and AC classes of all trains.

The new rates will be effective from 26 December.

"There is no increase in the monthly season tickets of suburban trains and up to 215 km travel in the ordinary class of other trains," officials said, adding that the hike will fetch Rs 600 crore to the Railways till 31 March, 2026.

The Railway Ministry said the previous fare hike in July 2025 generated Rs 700 crore revenue.

In practical terms, a 500 km journey in a non-AC coach will now cost Rs 10 more, Railways officials said.

Suburban train fares and monthly season tickets have been left untouched to protect daily commuters and low and middle-income passengers.

The fare hike comes against the backdrop of rising operational and manpower costs. The Railways' manpower expenses have climbed to Rs 1.15 lakh crore, while pension liabilities stand at Rs 60,000 crore. Total operational costs touched Rs 2.63 lakh crore in the 2024-25 financial year.

Officials said the additional revenue would help offset these costs, alongside a renewed push to increase freight loading.

The Railways has also announced a large number of special trains for the festive season.

244 special train trips will be operated across eight zones during Christmas and New Year to serve the expected surge in passenger traffic. *— PTI*

G RAM G is now a law as Prez gives her nod

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday gave assent to the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB G RAM G) Bill, formally replacing the MGNREGA. With the Gazette notification issued, the legislation has come into force as the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025, marking a major overhaul of India's rural employment framework.

The Act guarantees 125 days of wage employment for rural workers and aligns rural development with the national vision of 'Viksit Bharat 2047', the Rural Development Ministry said. States are empowered to notify a pause period of up to 60 days annually to ensure the availability of agricultural labour during peak sowing and harvesting seasons. The government said the law transforms rural employment from a standalone welfare measure into an integrated development tool.

Passed by Parliament last week amid opposition protests, the legislation has drawn sharp criticism from the Congress, which accused the Centre of dismantling a "groundbreaking law" without consultation. Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan rejected the criticism, calling the new scheme a step ahead of MGNREGA and alleging misinformation. He said over Rs 1.51 lakh crore would be allocated to ensure adequate funding.

The Act mandates weekly wage payments, or within 15 days of work completion, with compensation for delays. Employment is linked to the creation of durable public assets across four priority areas—water security, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure, and climate resilience. All projects will originate from Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, approved by Gram Sabhas and digitally integrated with national platforms, including PM Gati Shakti. The cost-sharing pattern remains 60:40 between Centre and states, 90:10 for northeastern and Himalayan states. *—PTI*

Adani to enter engine MRO, jet-to-freighter conversion space

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Adani Group plans to expand into aircraft engine maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) and passenger-to-freighter (P2F) conversion, a top official said.

The conglomerate has separated its aviation vertical into airport infrastructure and aircraft services, covering both civilian and defence use. MRO firms Air Works and Indamer are being combined into a single platform, said Jeet Adani, Director, Adani Airport Holdings Ltd.

The group, which entered MRO last December with the Rs 400-crore acquisition of Air Works, is expanding capabilities in landing gear, painting, P2F conversion and engines. It has also acquired Indamer Technics and a 72.8% stake in Flight Simulation Technique Centre (FSTC) for Rs 820 crore.

Adani plans new MRO bases in Ahmedabad, Guwahati and Bhubaneswar, and aims to expand pilot training capacity from 15 to 45–50 simulators in 2–3 years. India is set to induct 1,700 aircraft, requiring 30,000 additional pilots. The group recently announced a Rs 1 lakh crore investment in airports over five years.. *—PTI*

CHRISTMAS CHEER IN THE AIR

St Mary's Basilica in Shivajinagar is lit up as Bengaluru gears up for Christmas **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

BJP-led Mahayuti sweeps Maharashtra local body polls

MUMBAI, 21 DEC

The ruling Mahayuti alliance secured a resounding victory in Maharashtra's local body elections, with the BJP emerging as the single largest party. Of the 288 municipal councils and town panchayats, the BJP won 129 seats, including over 120 presidencies.

Allies performed strongly: Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena secured around 54 presidencies, while Ajit Pawar's NCP claimed 40. In contrast, the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) fared poorly, with Con-gress winning 34 presidencies, Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT) eight, and Sharad Pawar's NCP sev-en.

The results reflect the BJP-led alliance's dominance following its success in the 2024 Vidhan Sabha elec-tions, where the party won 132 seats. Congress state chief Harsh Vardhan Sapkal warned BJP allies Shinde and Pawar of potential disciplinary action, signalling continued tension within the ruling coalition. The State Election Commission is yet to declare all results. *—PTI*

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'MINING FEARS MISINFORMATION'

90% of Aravalli remain protected: Centre

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The Centre on Sunday rejected allegations that a new definition of the Aravalli range would open the door to large-scale mining, asserting that over 90 per cent of the region will remain protected and that no relaxation has been granted.

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said the definition, approved by the Supreme Court on 20 November, places a freeze on new mining leases until a comprehensive Management Plan for Sustainable Mining is finalised. He accused critics, including the Congress, of spreading misinformation.

"In the total Aravalli area of 1.44 lakh sq km, mining eligibility exists in only 0.19 per cent. The rest is preserved and protected," Yadav said after a meeting in the Sundarbans.

The new framework defines Aravalli hills as a landform with 100m elevation, triggering fears that it would be destroyed for construction **PHOTO: PTI**

Under the new framework, an Aravalli hill is defined as a landform with an elevation of 100m or more above local relief, while an Aravalli range comprises two or more such hills within 500m of each other. The government clarified that it is incorrect to assume that areas below 100 metres are open for mining, as protection applies to entire hill systems and enclosed landforms, not just peaks or slopes.

The definition standardises criteria across Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat and Delhi, following Supreme Court directions to prevent ambiguity and misuse that allowed mining near hill bases. Additional safeguards include mandatory mapping, identification of core and inviolate zones, and a ban on mining in protected areas, eco-sensitive zones, tiger reserves and wetlands.

No new leases will be granted until the management plan is prepared by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education. Existing mines may operate only if they meet strict sustainability norms. The Centre said illegal mining remains the primary threat to the Aravallis. *—PTI*

Bengal singer harassed for 'secular' song, 1 held

KOLKATA, 21 DEC

Bengali singer Lagnajita Chakraborty has alleged that she was harassed during a musical programme at a private school in West Bengal's Purba Medinipur district, leading to the arrest of one of the event organisers.

Confirming, a police officer said the main accused, Mehbub Mallik, a co-owner of the school where the event was held, was arrested on Sunday.

Lagnajita claimed that the incident took place on Saturday during a programme at the school in Bhagabanpur.

"After rendering several songs, I began singing 'Jago Maa' from the film 'Devi Chowdhurani.' At that point, objections were raised by one of the organisers, Mehbub Mallik, who insisted that only 'secular songs' should be performed," she said.

Chakraborty lodged a complaint at the Bhagabanpur police station. Purba Medinipur SP Mitun Dey said the accused was arrested."

The incident also led to a departmental inquiry against the officer-in-charge of Bhagabanpur police station following allegations that the singer and her team were initially discouraged from filing an FIR. The incident triggered sharp reactions, with BJP leader Shankudeb Panda claiming that Mallik is an active TMC worker. *—PTI*

Leadership row is local, not at High Command level: Kharge

Don't blame High Command, says AICC Prez as he warns against individualism

Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge during a protest against the G RAM G bill, in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

KALABURAGI, 21 DEC

- Amid a power struggle between Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar, Kharge said the blame did not lie with the Congress High Command

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge on Sunday said that the confusion over the leadership issue in the State unit exists only at the local level and not within the party High Command.

Speaking to reporters in Kalaburagi on Sunday, Kharge said, "The High Command hasn't created any confusion. It exists at the local level."

"How is it right to put the blame on the High Command?" he asked. His comments come amid an alleged power struggle between Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

Kharge added the local leaders should take ownership of the internal disputes rather than blaming the High Command.

The Congress veteran also cautioned against claiming credit for the party's electoral success. "Everyone has built the party. It's not any individual's effort. Congress has been built by party workers. Congress workers supported us," he said without naming anyone.

Several of Shivakumar's loyalists had highlighted the KPCC President's contribution to the party, claiming that he should be rewarded for his work and made the Chief Minister. Home Minister G Parameshwara, who had also served as the KPCC president earlier and also threw his hat into the race had also highlighted his contributions to the party.

The Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha urged party workers to stop boasting about personal contributions.

Asked about Shivakumar heading to Delhi to meet the Party High Command, Kharge added, "I don't have information on the matter."

Earlier, Siddaramaiah had expressed confidence that the party leadership supported him to complete his full five-year term. —*PTI*

CM Siddaramaiah and FM Nirmala Sitharaman administer polio drops in Bengaluru and Vijayanagara respectively, on Sunday **PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ASAD/ X@NSITHARAMAN**

CM, FM lead polio vaccination drive

BENGALURU, 21 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman led the State-wide pulse polio vaccination drive on Sunday.

While Siddaramaiah kicked off the campaign, along with State Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao and Home Minister G Parameshwara, at his residence 'Kaveri' in Bengaluru, Sitharaman, who is in Vijayanagara district, administered pulse polio drops to children below five in Kamalapura.

According to the details shared by health departments, about 62.4 lakh children have been identified for the drive.

"Under the routine immunisation programme, every child is given five doses of OPV (Oral Polio Vaccine) and three doses of IPV (inactivated injectable polio vaccine), and the Government of Karnataka is committed to ensuring that no child misses these doses," a government statement said.

Special attention will be given to immunising children living in villages, hilly areas, brick kilns, slums, migrant areas, farmhouses, and urban slums.

Booths will also be set up in railway stations, metro stations, airports and harbours, the statement said.

The Health Department has set up 33,258 booths and deployed 1,030 mobile teams, 2,096 transit teams, 1,13,115 vaccinators and 7,322 Supervisors.

All children aged below five will be administered the oral polio vaccine on 21 December, 2025.

"Even if your child has received OPV doses before, it is essential to immunise your child again during this round," the department said.

The department said the polio vaccine is completely safe and people should not believe in false rumours.

Meanwhile, Chamaraja MLA K Harish Gowda launched the drive in Mysuru. Mysuru district health authorities will cover 2.22 lakh children, he noted.

— *Salar News with agencies*

Aarvee Ltd to prepare DRP for Tumakuru metro

BENGALURU, 21 DEC

Aarvee Engineering Consultants Limited won the contract to prepare the Detailed Project Report (DPR) for the extension of the Bangalore Metro's Green Line from Madavara (BIEC) to Tumakuru.

Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited's (BMRCL) provided the Letter of Authorisation to the firm at Rs 1.2 Crore

The proposed Metro corridor will cover a distance of 59.60 kilometres, running through Madavara, Nelamangala, Dabaspet, Kyathsandra and Tumakuru.

The Green Line of the Bengaluru Metro presently extends from Madavara to Silk Route, covering a total length of 33.46 km with 31 stations along the corridor. The 59 km-long Madavara-Tumakuru section is expected to become the State's first inter-city Metro line.

However, the Opposition BJP has questioned the feasibility of the project, with Bengaluru South MP Tejasvi Surya saying that a metro would move at the speed of a bus, questioning whether the cost of the project would justify the result. —*Salar News*

Barred from Belagavi, Sena MP meets Birla

BELAGAVI, 21 DEC

Prevented from entering Belagavi district on Karnataka Rajyotsava day to attend pro-Maharashtra 'black day' events, Maharashtra Shiv Sena MP Dhairyasheel Mane moved a breach of privilege motion with Lok Sabha Speaker Om Prakash Birla against Belagavi DC Mohammed Roshan. Mane, who represents Hatakanagala, said that as an elected public representative, he has the right to go to any part of the country.

The district administration had banned Mane from entering the district on 1 November.

LS Speaker Om Birla and Shive Sena MP Dhairyasheel Mane **PHOTO: FB**

Mane submitted a complaint to Birla seeking the initiation of breach of privilege proceedings against Belagavi Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Roshan, alleging violation of his constitutional rights.

The MP met the Speaker in New Delhi and submitted a written complaint.

In his complaint, Mane stated that the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) and the Marathi-speaking people of Belagavi observe 1 November as "Black Day" to protest against not including the Marathi speaking areas in Karnataka in Maharashtra.

On 1 November 1956 Belagavi was included in Karnataka.

The MP said the observance marks what they consider as an injustice done in 1956, when Belagavi and 865 other Marathi-speaking villages were merged with Karnataka.

Mane said that on 1 November 2025, while he was travelling from Maharashtra to Karnataka, he was served a "Legal Notice" at the Karnataka border as per the orders of the Belagavi DC.

He said that, as per the notice, the police prevented him from entering Belagavi. — *Salar News*

G RAM G Bill is progressive, enhances transparency: Prahlad

HUBBALLI, 21 DEC

- The Opposition in the Centre has protested the G RAM G Bill, which replaced MGNREGA. However, Joshi pointed to the increase in working days, saying it will bolster reverse migration

Union Minister Pralhad Joshi on Sunday dismissed the claim that the recently passed Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill is an attempt to snatch employment opportunities from people.

"It is the most progressive bill. Some people are opposing it, claiming it will snatch employment opportunities in rural areas, which is false. It will bring transparency, and the number of job days has been increased from 100 to 125. It will improve rural infrastructure, support higher employment and consumption, and help in reverse migration," he said.

Congress leader KC Venugopal accused the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)-led Centre of dismantling the MGNREGA act, saying that it has been reduced from a legal right to a "favour".

However, Union Minister Shivraj Singh dismissed the claims: "Misinformation is being spread, whereas the truth is that the Viksit Bharat G Ram G Scheme is the next step forward for MGNREGA. Worker brothers, now it's not 100, but a legal guarantee of 125 days of work. Provisions for unemployment allowance in case work is not provided have been further strengthened. If wages are delayed, provisions have also been made to provide additional amounts." —*ANI*

Leopard kills 3 calves in Chamarajanagar

MYSURU, 21 DEC

Panic gripped Gangavadi village in Chamarajanagar taluk after a leopard killed three calves and injured another on Saturday night.

The cat attacked the livestock which were tied at the cattle shed in local Ramaiah's backyard, partially eating the animals.

The residents discovered the scene on Sunday morning.

Forest officials who inspected the site confirmed it was a leopard attack. Leopard sightings were reported earlier in the area, and villagers have urged the forest department to take immediate measures to prevent further incidents. Kollegal MLA AR Krishnamurthy also visited the spot along with forest department officers.

PHOTO: FREEPIK

The MLA gave directions to forest officials to release the compensation as per the department norms.

—*Salar News*

CM announces Rs 6 cr reward for Olympic winners

BENGALURU, 21 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the government would provide Rs 6 crore for any State athlete who wins a gold medal in the Olympics.

"If a Karnataka person wins gold in the Olympic Games, I will give them Rs 6 crores," Siddaramaiah said at the award presentation ceremony of Karnataka Olympic 2025 in Bengaluru on Sunday. "If a Karnataka person wins silver, I will provide them with Rs 4 crores, and Rs 3 crores for a bronze. The purpose is that anyone from Karnataka should win gold or silver, it is possible."

He noted that the government is prioritising sports.

"We have also provided reservations for athletes in government recruitments," he added. "In the Police and Forest Departments, 3 per cent reservation, and in other departments, 2 per cent reservation will be provided for athletes."

"In January, a government order will be issued for recruitment to government jobs under sports reservation," he added, saying that more youth should participate in the sports sector.

Home Minister G Parameshwara praised the that Karnataka Olympic Association, adding that "the Chief Minister has provided a good building for the Kanteerava Stadium Olympic Association. As far as I know, no other Olympic organisation in the country has its own building." —*Salar News*

Mysuru flower show 'Maaghi Utsav' inaugurated near Palace

Mysuru Palace will be illuminated during the event **PHOTO: SALAR**

MYSURU, 21 DEC

'Maaghi Utsav,' the annual flower show organised in connection with the winter festival was inaugurated by MLA Tanveer Sait on the premises of the Mysuru Palace on Sunday. The 11th edition of the flower show will be open till 31 December.

He was accompanied by MLA TS Srivatsa, MLC Dr D. Thimmaiah, Karnataka Exhibition Authority Chairman Ayub Khan, Deputy Commissioner G. Lakshmikanth Reddy and others.

The 10 day festival will see several cultural performances **PHOTO: SALAR**

Cultural programmes will be held during all 10 days. The Mysuru Palace will be illuminated from 7 pm to 9 pm.

Kannada musicians Mani Kanth Kadri, Vasuki Vaibhav, Ajay Warrior and others will participate in music events.

A replica of the Sringeri Temple Model, a portrait of Salumara Thimmakka Mummadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, Operation Sindoor, Women's Cricket World Cup winners, preamble of the constitution, digital display of World Cup Kho-kho, Kabaddi and Blind Cricket Team winners are the highlights of this year's flower show.

The festival will conclude with a demo by the police band on 31 December from 11.45 pm to 12.15 am to welcome the New Year. — *Salar News*

Melukote pontiff bats for inclusiveness in Kolar

KOLAR, 21 DEC

The teachings of Vishishtadvaita propounded by Sri Ramanujacharya continue to be relevant even in the present day as they foster oneness and harmony among humankind, said Sri Yadugiri Yathiraj Narayana Ramanuja Jeeyar, pontiff of Melukote Peeta. Delivering his blessing address to devotees at the Sri Venugopala Swamy Temple in Holur village of Kolar taluk on Sunday, the Jeeyar said Ramanujacharya stood for the welfare of the entire mankind, transcending barriers of caste, creed and social divisions.

He noted that Ramanujacharya firmly believed every human being has the right to offer prayers to the Almighty and stressed inclusivity in spiritual practice. The philosophy of Vishishtadvaita, he said, has received global recognition for its message of unity and devotion. The Jeeyar added that, through the blessings and inspiration of Ramanujacharya, more than 18,000 temples across the country have been renovated and are actively contributing to the unification of society.

Yadugiri Yathiraj Narayana Ramanuja Jeeyar **PHOTO: SALAR**

Murali, priest of the Venugopala Swamy Temple, and Sri Lakshminarayanaswamy Temple Krishna Prasad, were present. —*Salar News*

TWO-HOURS AT NIGHT

Belagavi village launches State's 1st 'digital detox'

BELAGAVI, 21 DEC

At exactly 7pm everyday, a siren sounds across a Belagavi village, signalling the start of a daily two-hour "digital detox". Within moments, television screens go dark, mobile phones are put aside, and homes fall unusually quiet — not by enforcement, but by collective choice.

Residents of the Halaga village – which has a population of about 12,000 people – unanimously agreed to the initiative, inspired by the success of similar ideas in Maharashtra.

Located opposite the Suvarna Vidhan Soudha and about 14km from Belagavi city, Halaga has become the first village in Karnataka to adopt a structured, village-wide digital detox aimed at improving students' academic focus, encouraging family conversations, and strengthening social bonding.

The initiative, titled "No TV, No Mobile, Just Study and Conversation," was formally inaugurated by Gram Panchayat President Lakshmi Gajapati by sounding the siren. Former Gram Panchayat president Ganpat Marihalkar said the move reflects the village's long-standing commitment to education.

"Our intention is simple — to prioritise academic study, which is increasingly affected by excessive screen time. At present, a manual siren is used, but an automatic siren with a timer will be installed soon," Marihalkar said.

He said the Gram Panchayat spends nearly Rs 2.5 lakh annually from its own funds to strengthen the village's two government schools.

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Facilities such as a playground, compound wall under MGNREGA (now VB G-RAM-G), science rooms, and computer labs have been developed. Local MLA Laxmi Hebbalkar has also supported the installation of digital boards for smart classes, he added.

"Avoiding screens has become the need of the hour. Teachers have been asked to impress upon students the importance of following the initiative at home, and volunteers will take rounds during the screen-off hours," Social worker Anil Shinde said.

Explaining the timing, Shinde said many rural households have limited space, forcing children to study in rooms when televisions are on. "The 7pm to 9pm slot is prime time for TV serials. By switching off screens, we are giving children a fair chance to focus".

Halaga was inspired by Agran Dhulgaon village in Sangli district, Maharashtra, which gained national attention for a similar experiment.

Following its success, Mohityanche Vadgaon in Sangli district and Mangaon village in Kolhapur district have also adopted screen-free evening initiatives. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

Bihar CM on 2-day Delhi tour, to meet PM, NDA leaders

PATNA, 21 DEC

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Sunday left for a two-day visit to New Delhi, where he is expected to meet top NDA leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This marks Kumar's first trip to the capital since being sworn in for a record fifth consecutive term last month. Key discussions are likely to include the expansion of the state cabinet, scheduled after Makar Sankranti, and finding a replacement for Nitin Nabin, who recently resigned upon becoming BJP national working president. The potential political entry of Kumar's son, Nishant, may also be raised. Preparations for 2026 Rajya Sabha and Bihar Legislative Council elections could feature, with the NDA well-positioned to secure multiple seats given its Assembly majority. *—PTI*

PMK's Ramadoss calls party meet amid family feud

CHENNAI, 21 DEC

Amid an ongoing leadership dispute with his son Anbumani, PMK founder S Ramadoss on Sunday announced that a special meeting of the party's Executive Committee and General Council will be held in Salem on 29 December. While Anbumani continues to assert he is the party chief, Ramadoss stated that the meetings would focus on the party's growth and future work plans. Party workers are keenly awaiting the party's decision on alliances for the 2026 Assembly elections. Addressing speculation over a possible split in the electoral battle, Ramadoss confirmed that the Executive Committee would meet from 10.00am to 11.30 am, immediately followed by the General Council meeting, where the Assembly election strategy will be discussed. *—PTI*

Meat and alcohol ban enforced in Punjab holy cities

CHANDIGARH, 21 DEC

The Punjab government has banned the sale of meat, alcohol, tobacco and other intoxicants in Amritsar's Walled City, Talwandi Sabo and Sri Anandpur Sahib after granting them 'holy city' status. Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann said the decision has taken effect following the issuance of a State notification. The move follows a unanimous resolution passed during a special session of the Punjab Assembly held last month in Sri Anandpur Sahib to mark the 350th martyrdom anniversary of Guru Tegh Bahadur. The notification covers Sri Anandpur Sahib in Rupnagar district, Talwandi Sabo in Bathinda district and the Galiara area around the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Mann said strict regulations would apply and assured improved transport and development facilities for devotees visiting these key Sikh religious centres. *—PTI*

M'rashtra BJP celebrates, Oppn says EVMs tampered

CM credits development plank for Mahayuti's civic polls victory

NAGPUR, 21 DEC

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday claimed the BJP scored a record victory in local body elections, while opposition parties alleged EVM tampering and misuse of money power.

Addressing the media, CM said the BJP emerged as the single largest party, with 48 per cent of councillors elected on its symbol — a "historic" performance. BJP candidates were elected presidents in 129 municipal councils and Mahayuti nominees secured top posts in around 75 per cent of local bodies.

"We fought the polls on a development agenda," Fadnavis said, adding he ran a positive campaign focused on governance and future plans.

The elections to 286 MCs and nagar panchayats were marked by multi-cornered contests, with Mahayuti allies — BJP, Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP — competing against each other in some areas. Mahavikas Aghadi constituents also witnessed alliances and friendly fights.

Opposition parties questioned the outcome. Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut alleged EVM tampering, claiming the opposition could not withstand a "hailstorm" of money. Party leader Ambadas Danve accused the ruling alliance of deploying money and muscle power.

State Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal offered a pointed remark, "congratulating" the state election machinery for "facilitating" Mahayuti's victory, even as he congratulated winning candidates.

Maharashtra BJP president Ravindra Chavan rejected claims, saying voters decisively rejected the Opposition's "fake narrative".

Union minister Nitin Gadkari described the results as a victory of party workers and BJP's development-oriented approach.

Senior Mahayuti leaders said the mandate reflected public confidence in governance, asserting similar results would repeat in upcoming urban civic polls, including Greater Mumbai civic elections. *—PTI*

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said the BJP emerged as the single largest party, with 48 per cent of councillors elected on its symbol **PHOTO: PTI**

UNVEILS RS 15.6K CR PROJECTS

PM sets mood for 2026 polls during 2-day Assam visit

NAMRUP, 21 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday wrapped up a two-day visit to Assam, blending governance, symbolism and sharp political messaging to set the tone for the 2026 Assembly elections. During his third visit to the state this year, Modi launched projects worth Rs 15,600 crore, interacted with students and BJP workers, paid homage to martyrs of the Assam Agitation, and repeatedly targeted the Congress.

On Saturday, Modi paid tributes to the martyrs of the Assam Agitation, unveiled an 80-foot statue of Assam's first Chief Minister Gopinath Bardoloi, inaugurated the Rs 4,000-crore new terminal at Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International Airport, and addressed a public rally. At the rally, he accused the Congress of encouraging infiltrators to occupy land and forests, while neglecting Assam's development.

On Sunday, the Prime Minister interacted with 25 students during a 'Pariksha Pe Charcha' session aboard the cruise vessel MV Charaidew 2 on the Brahmaputra, answering questions on academics, careers and personal growth. Modi then travelled to Namrup, where he laid the foundation stone of a Rs 10,601-crore brownfield ammonia-urea plant, with an annual capacity of 12.7 lakh tonnes, slated for commissioning in 2030. Touted as the first such plant in India to use associated natural gas, the project is expected to boost agriculture and create thousands of jobs.

Addressing a rally at Namrup, Modi launched a fierce attack on the Congress, accusing it of "anti-national" activities, appeasement politics and opposing voter list revision to protect its vote bank. He said the BJP would safeguard Assam's identity, land and pride, promote industrialisation and connectivity, and restore the state's historic strength. The Prime Minister later departed for New Delhi from Dibrugarh. *—PTI*

Telangana CM A Revanth Reddy along with cabinet minister and ex-cricketer Mohammad Azharuddin during an event, in Hyderabad **PHOTO: PTI**

T'gana to bring hate speech law soon: CM

HYDERABAD, 21 DEC

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Saturday announced that the State government will soon introduce legislation against hate speech. Speaking at Christmas celebrations organised by the state, he said the law would ensure liberty to follow any religion and protect equal rights for all communities.

Citing Karnataka's recent bill to penalise hate speech targeting religions, Reddy said Telangana will follow suit in the upcoming Assembly budget session. "We are here to protect your rights. If your rights are hurt anywhere, our government is ready to correct it," he said, emphasising that development and welfare for minorities is their right, not charity.

The Chief Minister also addressed the shortage of burial grounds for Christians, noting that lands in villages are limited. He assured the government would allocate lands slightly away from villages and provide vehicles or support voluntary organisations to transport the deceased.

Reddy praised Christian missionaries for establishing educational institutions over decades and pledged that the government would work in the spirit of Christmas to spread love and goodwill. He expressed his ambition for Telangana to become the country's leading state under the 'TelanganaRising' model, reflecting development and inclusivity. *—PTI*

BJP slams Revanth over 'Xmas due to Sonia' remark

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Opposition leaders have condemned Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy for his "sycophantic" claim that Christmas in the state stems from Sonia Gandhi's sacrifice, dismissing the remarks as "political bootlicking." Reddy was noting the significance, citing both Sonia Gandhi's birthday and the month of Telangana statehood.

The statements were made by Reddy while speaking at a government-organised Christmas event at Lal Bahadur Stadium in Hyderabad, where he stressed respect for all religions and said his government remains committed to communal harmony and to ensuring that the benefits of state programmes reach all communities.

The Chief Minister said Telangana will introduce a new law in the upcoming Budget session to punish those who insult any religion and tighten existing penalties, underscoring the government's resolve to curb communal hatred. Reddy also highlighted welfare measures for minorities, including resolving graveyard and burial issues. The BJP in Telangana reacted sharply, labelling the CM's comments "sycophancy" and ridiculing the attribution of Christmas celebrations to Sonia Gandhi. *—Agencies*

Passenger Ankit Dewan (right) bleeds after he was allegedly assaulted by off-duty Air India Express pilot Virender Sejwal, left, at Terminal 1 of Delhi airport **PHOTO: PTI**

AIX issues notice to pilot for assault

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Air India Express will set up an external committee next week to investigate the assault by an off-duty pilot on a passenger at Delhi airport on Friday. The airline, owned by the Tata Group, suspended the pilot, Virender Sejwal, immediately and issued him a show cause notice seeking an explanation.

The incident occurred at Terminal 1, where passenger Ankit Dewan shared photos on social media showing blood on his face following the altercation. Dewan also identified the pilot involved.

The Civil Aviation Ministry took serious note, directing the airline to ground the pilot with immediate effect. "A formal enquiry has been ordered. Detailed reports have been sought from BCAS and CISF," the ministry stated on X.

Air India Express condemned the behaviour, confirming the pilot's removal from duties pending probe. Officials also contacted the affected passenger to address the matter.

The inquiry will be conducted under labour law provisions, as pilots fall under the workmen category. The external panel is expected to examine all circumstances surrounding the incident, including the off-duty status of the pilot and other details. *—PTI*

Parl panel bats for creches for women workers

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Parliamentary committees have flagged significant gaps in both India's labour welfare and freight operations. The Committee on Empowerment of Women noted that welfare provisions for women construction workers are poorly implemented, with only MP and the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu reporting crèche facilities on the central portal. The committee recommended involving NGOs to set up crèches, extending operating hours to match women's work schedules, mandating a portion of CSR funds for childcare, and strengthening inspection mechanisms. It also suggested integrating occupational and mental health services into primary healthcare for informal women workers to ensure timely and effective delivery of welfare benefits.

Separately, the Standing Committee on Railways warned that crew shortages could hinder operations on India's fully electrified Dedicated Freight Corridors, designed to improve freight efficiency. Of 1,42,814 sanctioned loco pilot posts, only 1,07,928 are filled, while goods train manager posts are similarly under-staffed. The committee urged action to fill gaps, enhance freight speeds, improve first- and last-mile connectivity, rationalise freight rates.

Both committees emphasised the need for proactive government measures for welfare of workers, operational efficiency, and the delivery of services. *—PTI*

SHANTI Bill bulldozed for Trump, Adani: Congress

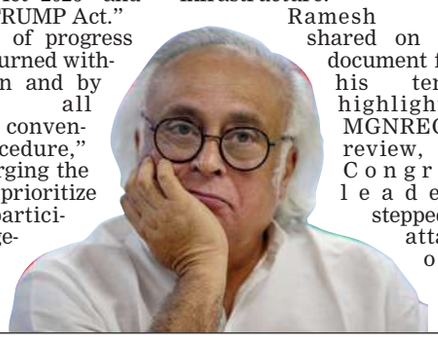
NEW DELHI, DEC 21

The Congress on Saturday criticized the Modi government for "bulldozing" the SHANTI Bill through Parliament, alleging it was done not just for "TRUMP but also for ADANI." The legislation, which aims to open India's tightly-controlled civil nuclear sector to private participation, was passed in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday and received approval in Rajya Sabha approval.

Congress on Saturday slammed the SHANTI Bill, alleging it was "bulldozed" in Parliament to benefit private players, including the Adani Group, which is reportedly eyeing a nuclear energy foray. Congress general secretary in charge of communications, Jairam Ramesh criticized the Bill for removing key provisions of the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act—a concern also flagged in the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act 2026—and dubbed it the "TRUMP Act."

"Two decades of progress have been overturned without consultation and by sidestepping all Parliamentary convention and procedure," Ramesh said, urging the government to prioritize public-sector participation and indigenous technology in developing India's nuclear power infrastructure.

Ramesh also shared on X a document from his tenure highlighting MGNREGA's review, as Congress leaders stepped up attacks on the Modi government over the law. A day earlier, Sonia Gandhi accused the Centre of bulldozing MGNREGA and said the proposed "black law" replacing it would be resisted nationwide, alleging it undermined the interests of rural poor. Parliament on Thursday passed the VB-G RAM G Bill to replace the 20-year-old MGNREGA, amid strong Opposition protests over the 125-day rural employment guarantee. *—PTI*



'NO TO DIVISIVE N INDIAN MODELS'

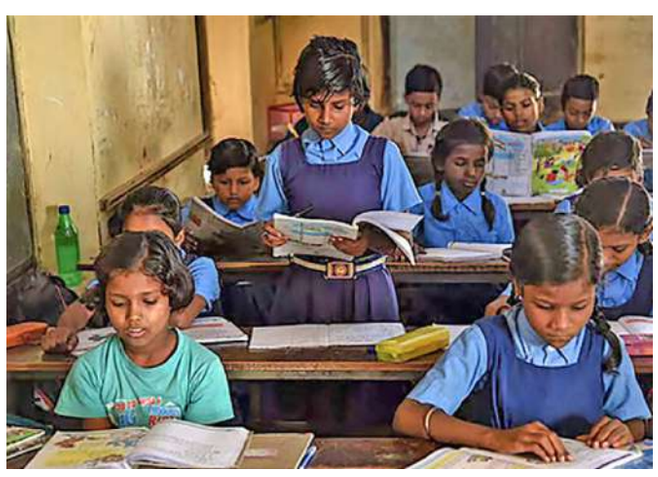
Kerala condemns 'communalising' of schools

T'PURAM, 21 DEC

Kerala government strongly condemned reports that some private school managements imposed restrictions on Christmas celebrations and refunded money collected from students for the event. The government also warned that schools would not be allowed to be turned into "communal laboratories".

Such actions are unheard of in a state like Kerala, which has a high level of democratic consciousness and a long-standing secular tradition. "No one will be allowed to introduce divisive north Indian models in Kerala's schools," General Education Minister V Sivankutty said, stressing that educational institutions must remain inclusive spaces. He noted that Kerala schools traditionally celebrate festivals like Onam, Christmas and Eid together.

Sivankutty termed the cancellation of celebrations by some private schools after collecting fees as "cruel" and hurtful to children, warning of strict action. He said all schools must uphold secular values, and cannot be used to serve narrow political or communal interests. Sivankutty also said complaints have been received regarding the compulsory special classes in during the Christmas. Such classes should not be conducted during holidays. *—PTI*



Government strongly condemned reports that some private schools imposed restrictions on Christmas celebrations **PHOTO: PTI**

'RSS image spoiled by smear campaign'

KOLKATA, 21 DEC

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said misconceptions about the organisation stem from "misleading campaigns" and highlighted lectures in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru to present facts. He stressed the Sangh has no enemies and urged opinions be based on facts, not narratives. Bhagwat said RSS has no political agenda, working for Hindu society's welfare and preparing India to regain its 'Vishwaguru' role. Linking India's well-being to regional stability, he distinguished government policy from people-to-people goodwill amid unrest in Bangladesh. He also urged citizens to read the Constitution's core tenets, including the Preamble. *—PTI*

WON'T BOW TO RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY EVEN IF IT COSTS VOTES: SIVANKUTTY

T'PURAM, 21 DEC

Kerala General Education Minister V Sivankutty on Sunday said the state would not bow to religious orthodoxy from any faith, even if it costs the ruling LDF votes temporarily. In an interview with PTI after the Left's poor showing in local body polls, the CPI(M) leader said issues such as the hijab row at a Kochi school and opposition to Zumba fitness programmes were "blown out of proportion". He said the government intervened in the hijab case to protect a student's constitutional right to education and religious expression, while resistance to fitness and anti-drug initiatives reflected "regression".

On the Sabarimala case, Sivankutty said devotees continue to trust the government and the SIT probe is progressing, accusing the UDF and BJP of politicisation. He rejected claims of anti-incumbency, calling the poll setback a "wake-up call, not a death knell", and said local body results do not mirror Assembly elections. Sivankutty said the LDF stands by principles on Palestine, minority rights, labour laws and education policy, asserting the Left would regain ground ahead of the '26 Assembly polls. *—PTI*

Delhi MACT grants Rs 68.74L to parents for '22 road accident

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

A Delhi Tribunal has awarded Rs 68.74 lakh as compensation to the parents of a 24-year-old man who died in a road accident in 2022. Presiding Officer Richa Manchanda was hearing a claim petition filed by the parents of deceased Harshit Verma regarding the accident that happened near Rohini Jail staff quarters in Badli here on 6 March, 2022. According to the prosecution, Verma was in the front passenger seat in a car driven by Divyam Dabas who had hit the car to divider. The tribunal on 15 December said that it was clear that Verma suffered fatal injuries. Noting that his parents were dependent on him, the tribunal awarded a total compensation of Rs 68.74 lakhs directing ICICI Lombard General Insurance Co Ltd, to deposit the amount. *—PTI*

UP student claims principal objected to his 'tilak'

HARDOI, 21 DEC

A law student has filed a complaint with the Hardoi district, accusing his college principal of objecting to him sporting a 'tilak' on his forehead, officials said on Sunday. Amit Yadav, a first-semester student at the BN Degree College in Shahabad, alleged that the principal, Umar, made objectionable remarks and asked him to remove his tilak before attending classes. In his complaint, submitted during the 'Tehsil Samadhan Diwas' on Saturday, he claimed the principal told him that "this is BN Degree College, not a gurukul." Denying the claims, Umar said he neither stopped any student from wearing a tilak nor made any remarks. Sub-divisional magistrate Shahabad Ankit Tiwari confirmed that a complaint was received and an inquiry is on. *—PTI*

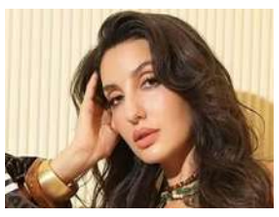


PHOTO: ANI

Nora Fatehi suffers slight concussion post accident

MUMBAI, 21 DEC

Actor Nora Fatehi on Sunday said she was "okay" after a car accident in Mumbai, though she suffered minor injuries and a slight concussion. The 33-year-old was travelling to the Sunburn music festival when a drunk driver rammed into her car in the western suburbs; police arrested the accused. Sharing videos on Instagram, Fatehi said the impact flung her across the vehicle and she hit her head on the window. "I'm alive and well," she said, calling the incident "terrifying" and "traumatic". Urging people not to drink and drive, Fatehi said such behaviour was unacceptable. Despite the ordeal, she attended the fest and performed with DJ David Guetta. *—PTI*

Rs 2 cr siphoned from India's Mission in Geneva

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The CBI has launched a probe into the swindling of more than Rs 2 crore at India's Permanent Mission in Geneva by a former accounts officer posted there, who allegedly siphoned the amount to bankroll his crypto-gambling ventures, officials said. Mohit, who joined the Permanent Mission in Geneva on 17 December, 2024, as an assistant section officer, was given the responsibility to physically submit payment instructions to the Union Bank of Switzerland, where the accounts of the Mission are maintained in US dollars and Swiss francs, they said. Mohit allegedly replaced some of the vendor QR codes with a self-generated QR code, which diverted the payments amounting to Rs 2 crore to his personal CHF account in UBS. The CBI booked cases against Mohit. *—PTI*

North India reels under fog, cold wave; flights hit

'Yellow alert' issued for J'khand; 110 flights cancelled in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

In the national capital, air quality plunged into the "very poor" category, with the Air Quality Index touching 386, according to the Central Pollution Control Board *PHOTO: PTI*

Dense fog blanketed large parts of north India on Sunday, severely impacting air travel, road visibility and daily life, with Delhi bearing the brunt early in the day.

In the national capital, air quality plunged into the "very poor" category, with the Air Quality Index touching 386, according to the Central Pollution Control Board. Sixteen monitoring stations reported "severe" air quality. Delhi recorded a minimum temperature of 9.4 degrees Celsius, slightly above the seasonal average, while the IMD issued a yellow alert for moderate fog, forecasting a maximum of around 17 degrees.

Low visibility disrupted aviation operations, leading to the cancellation of 110 flights at Delhi airport, 59 arrivals and 51 departures, while over 370 services were delayed. Delhi International Airport Ltd said operations were running smoothly despite weather-related disruptions.

Fog and winter chill intensified across Punjab and Haryana, with Narnaul recording 5.2 degrees Celsius and Gurdaspur 6.8 degrees. Chandigarh logged a minimum of 8.8 degrees. Rajasthan saw a marginal rise in night temperatures, though most places remained below 10 degrees, with dense fog forecast in northern and western parts.

In Kashmir, overcast skies brought snowfall in higher reaches and rain in the plains, pushing Srinagar's minimum temperature to 4 degrees, the warmest night this winter. Jharkhand remained under dense fog and cold alerts, with the IMD warning of poor visibility and temperatures dipping further in coming days.

Man dies as 2 cars collide due to fog in UP

A 45-year-old man was killed in a head-on collision between two cars amid dense fog on the Lucknow–Delhi national highway in UP's Bareilly district, police said. The accident occurred late Saturday night between Navadiya Jhadha and Bithri Chainpur bridge.

The victim, Rupesh Kumar Agarwal, an accountant with the Faridpur Municipal Council, was rushed to hospital but succumbed to injuries. *—PTI*

FOR 'DIRECT-TO-SMARTPHONE' NETWORK

ISRO to launch BlueBird on 24 Dec

CHENNAI, 21 DEC

ISRO's LVM3-M6 mission will launch the next-generation 'BlueBird Block-2' communication satellite on 24 December, marking a dedicated commercial mission for US-based AST SpaceMobile.

The satellite is designed to deliver direct-to-smartphone cellular broadband worldwide, bridging connectivity gaps.

The mission is being executed under a commercial agreement between NewSpace India Ltd, ISRO's commercial arm, and AST SpaceMobile (AST & Science, LLC). The spacecraft will be the heaviest payload ever carried by LVM3 into low Earth orbit.

"We are on a mission to eliminate the connectivity gaps faced by today's nearly six billion mobile subscribers," AST SpaceMobile said. *—PTI*

BLUEBIRD BLOCK-2 'AT A GLANCE'

India's most powerful rocket, LVM3-M6, will launch a US-based AST SpaceMobile BlueBird Block-2 satellite. Here are the details

When and where: 24 Dec; Sriharikota, Andhra

Why it matters

- Heaviest payload of 6.1 tonnes ever launched into Low Earth Orbit (LEO) by ISRO.
- BlueBird Block-2 aims to deliver direct-to-smartphone connectivity from space, without ground-based towers.

What will it enable

- 4G & 5G voice calls.
- Video calls and streaming.
- 24/7 global smartphone coverage, even in remote areas.

Key tech

- Features a 223 sq metre phased-array antenna.
- Largest commercial communications satellite ever deployed in LEO.

Kerala HC scraps Sabarimala airport land acquisition

KOCHI, 21 DEC

- The court held that mandatory provisions under relevant sections of the 2013 Act were not complied with, noting "manifest non-application of mind"

The Kerala High Court has set aside key stages of the land acquisition process for the proposed Sabarimala greenfield airport, holding that the State failed to assess the minimum land required for the project.

Justice C Jayachandran, ruling on a writ petition filed by Ayana Charitable Trust, formerly Gospel for Asia, and its managing trustee Dr Siny Punnoose, said decision-making under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, was flawed.

On 30 December, 2022, the State sanctioned acquisition of 2,570 acres, covering the Cheruvally Estate in Pathanamthitta district and an additional 307 acres outside it, for an airport to serve Sabarimala pilgrims.

In its 19 December order, the court directed the government to restart the process by conducting a fresh Social Impact Assessment limited to determining the "absolute bare minimum" land requirement, followed by expert appraisal and reconsideration by the state.

The court held that mandatory provisions under Sections 4(4)(d), 7(5)(b) and 8(1)(c) of the 2013 Act were not complied with, noting "manifest non-application of mind". Consequently, the SIA report, expert committee appraisal, government sanction and the Section 11 notification were quashed.

The court did not rule on allegations of fraud on power, kept them open, and advised including technical experts in future SIA teams. *—PTI*

BINS FIR AGAINST BOARD

J&K court blames natural disaster for Vaisho Devi deaths

JAMMU, 21 DEC

A court in Jammu and Kashmir's Katra has dismissed a plea seeking registration of an FIR against Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board officials over the death of 35 pilgrims in a landslide on 26 August, holding that the tragedy was caused by a natural disaster.

Sub-Judge (Judicial Magistrate First Class) Katra Sidhant Vaid ruled that no prima facie case of criminal negligence was made out against the board's CEO or other officials. The plea alleged that despite weather advisories from the Meteorological Centre Srinagar and the J-K Disaster Management Authority, the pilgrimage was not suspended.

"From the perusal of the allegations, statements and police report, it is very much clear that the proximate and immediate cause of the unfortunate incident was a natural disaster," the court said, adding that any failure to follow advisories would be an administrative lapse.

Referring to police reports, the court noted that the Yatra was halted.

The court said the order would not affect the inquiry ordered by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha and held that criminal liability requires negligence and a direct causal link. *—PTI*

M'rashtra's Lonar lake water surge drowns temples, IIT-B studies

NAGPUR, 21 DEC

A sharp rise in water levels at Maharashtra's Lonar Lake in Buldhana has submerged several ancient temples, raising conservation concerns at the unique site.

The trend, observed over five to six years, has prompted authorities to seek expertise from IIT Bombay. Lonar Lake, the world's largest basaltic meteor-impact crater formed around 50,000 years ago, is a Ramsar wetland 460 km from Mumbai. About 15 temples on its lower rim, including the 1,200-year-old Kamalja Devi temple, are partly or fully submerged.

ASI archaeologist Arun Malik said plantation-driven changes in the reserve forest altered the micro-environment, increasing water retention.

District Collector Kiran Patil cited natural springs, lack of outlets, heavier rainfall and cloudbursts, while ruling out human interference. *—PTI*

Popular Front of India tried to get arms from abroad: NIA

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The National Investigation Agency told a Delhi court that the Popular Front of India was trying to procure arms from neighbouring countries and give arms training to its cadres, a NIA Special Public Prosecutor said.

The submissions were made before Special Judge (NIA) Prashant Sharma on Saturday, who was hearing arguments on the charges against 20 accused Popular Front of India (PFI) leaders.

The media was not allowed to report the in-camera court proceedings.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, NIA's Special Public Prosecutor Rahul Tyagi said he told the court that PFI leaders were trying to procure arms from neighbouring countries and give arms training to its cadres.

Regarding allegations against PFI leaders, Tyagi said, "They were also sending their cadres to Syria to learn tactics from the ISIS. They had hit squads who were keeping a list of BJP, RSS and VHP leaders, and conducting surveillance on them."

"The case against the PFI is that it tried to radicalise Muslim youth to establish a caliphate in India and impose Sharia," Tyagi said.

"They were organising camps, giving cadres arms training, and asking them to wage 'Jihad' against India, for which they were collecting funds abroad and in India," the prosecutor said.

The court posted the matter for further proceedings on 23 December. *—PTI*

India extends aid to North Lanka

COLOMBO, 21 DEC

India has extended its humanitarian assistance from Sri Lanka's north to the northern Jaffna peninsula after the devastation by Cyclone Ditwah under Operation Sagar Bandhu.

"As part of India's assistance to Sri Lanka under 'Operation Sagar Bandhu,' the Indian High Commission in Colombo, Assistant High Commission in Kandy and the Consulate General of India in Jaffna conducted humanitarian assistance distribution drives for families affected by Cyclone Ditwah," a press release said.

"On 18 December, Indian High Commissioner Santosh Jha distributed relief kits to families in Kolonnawa in coordination with the 'All Ceylon Sufi Spiritual Association' and the children of Bhaktivedanta Children's Home 'Gokulam' at the ISKCON Temple in Colombo," the release added.

"Earlier this month, the High Commissioner also distributed assistance among residents of Nayanalokagama, a village specially designated for the visually impaired, and among families in Negombo in Gampaha District," the release said.

Between 9 and 19 December, the Assistant High Commission of India in Kandy distributed food and supplies among hundreds of families in Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Badulla. Similarly, the Consulate General of India in Jaffna carried out aid distribution drives for families in Mannar, Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi, as well as the islands off Jaffna. *—PTI*

Assam elephants' death toll rises to eight

NAGAON, 21 DEC

Eight elephants are killed after a herd is struck by the Sairang-New Delhi Rajdhani Express, in Nagaon district, of Assam *PHOTO: PTI*

The death toll in a train–elephant collision in Assam's Hojai district rose to eight on Sunday after a calf died at the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Kaziranga.

Seven elephants were killed on the spot when the Sairang–New Delhi Rajdhani Express hit a herd in Changjurai village on Saturday, forest ranger Shamim Akhtar said. Five coaches and the engine derailed, but no passengers were injured. The carcasses were buried after autopsy. "The jumbos are still in the area and our personnel are camping there," Akhtar said. A case was registered and drivers detained. Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav sought a report, urged rail–forest coordination. *—PTI*

VICTIM RAPED WHEN MINOR

Deaf woman breaks 16 yrs of silence on sexual abuse

MUMBAI, 21 DEC

A deaf and mute woman's complaint about a sexual assault committed 16 years ago has exposed a serial sexual predator and a pattern of abuse and blackmail targeting speech and hearing-impaired women in Mumbai, police said.

The accused, Mahesh Pawar, was arrested on 13 December after the survivor recently broke her silence, prompted by the suicide attempt of another woman allegedly harassed by him. Disturbed by the incident, the survivor disclosed her ordeal with friends. Police said the woman, a resident of Mumbai's western suburbs, communicated in sign language and revealed that Pawar had drugged and raped her in 2009, when she was a minor. She later informed her husband and, with support from activists, a sign language interpreter and a retired official from the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities Divyangjan, approached the police.

Her statement was recorded at Kurar police station with the help of an interpreter, following which Pawar was arrested from Virar in Palghar. Recalling the assault, the survivor said a female acquaintance took her to Pawar's Vakola residence in July 2009, where she was allegedly forced to consume a spiked drink and sexually assaulted after being left alone.

Police said Pawar recorded obscene videos and used them to blackmail the survivor. Investigators found similar claims from other women, with evidence indicating abuse of seven victims. The number could exceed, an officer said. *—PTI*

KASHMIR'S BIG COLD

Jammu and Kashmir's harsh 40-day winter phase, known as Chillai-Kalaan, began on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday. Nearly two inches of snow fell in the north Kashmir's Gulmarg (pic), while Srinagar's temperature fell to 4 degrees Celsius, slightly above average due to overcast conditions. The Chillai-Kalaan (big cold) period will end on 30 January. It will be followed by 'Chillai-Khurd' (small cold) and 'Chillai-Bacha' (baby cold).
PHOTO: PTI

Indian football had a disastrous year in 2025

Indian football remained in a state of terminal decline after experiencing arguably its darkest phase in a year marked by severe administrative crisis, court hearings, financial issues, absence of domestic leagues, and a steep decline in performance of the senior men's team.

As the year drew to a close, the high-profile Lionel Messi GOAT India Tour generated some interest and forced a conversation around the sport.

The much-publicised event did what it was meant to, and was not supposed to serve as a catalyst for real improvement in Indian football.

If its own problems were not enough, the chaos and absolute disorder at Salt Lake Stadium on the first day of the Messi tour added to the embarrassment.

While the breakdown of law and order in the 'Mecca of Indian football' was not good advertisement, the remaining three legs in Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi were well organised.

Of the many disappointments, one on-field moment that still stings came when little-known Bangladeshi midfielder Sheikh Morsalin darted into the box and slipped the ball between the legs of Gurpreet Singh Sandhu with a delicate touch, completing another round of humiliation.

The 11th minute strike, in an inconsequential 2027 AFC Asian Cup qualifying match on a November evening in Dhaka, meant the Indian senior men's team suffered its first defeat to Bangladesh in 22 years, after having struggled through the last 12 months to produce a result of any significance.

While several factors contribute to a country's overall football ecosystem, India's senior mens was found severely wanting.

Unlike in 2024, when the team drew a blank in international matches, the Indian senior men's side did manage to churn out a few wins occasionally this year, including a bronze medal finish at the CAFA Nations Cup in September.

While the Indian senior men's team had a dismal show in 2025, the junior and women's squads put on powerful performances
PHOTO: X/@AIFF

But in the matches that mattered the most, India failed to deliver and could not qualify for the Asian Cup for the first time since the 2011 edition, following which the team plummeted further in the FIFA rankings.

The team also suffered defeats to other lower-ranked opponents such as Hong Kong and Singapore.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

While the men's team struggled on the field, especially when it came to scoring goals, the administrators grappled with issues off it.

The game remained in the middle of a crisis due to the All India Football Federation's failure to secure a new commercial partner for the Indian Super League after its previous contract with the Reliance-owned Football Sports Development Limited (FSDL) expired on 8 December.

The lack of a commercial partner has had a crippling effect on the game. The ISL, which would have been into its third month now under normal circumstances, remains on hold.

Sponsors are pulling out, clubs have put their operations on hold, players are staring at an uncertain future, after having implored each and every stakeholder to resolve the issue, and serious doubts hover over the domestic leagues' future.

The ongoing crisis has highlighted a systemic failure in the country's football ecosystem brought about by poor governance, lack of long-term vision and the absence of proper youth development programmes.

COURT HEARINGS

The year was also marked by frequent hearings at the Supreme Court and intervention from the union sports ministry to resolve the crisis. Even President Droupadi Murmu asked the stakeholders of Indian football to work together for the upliftment of the game.

When the Supreme Court approved the draft Constitution of the AIFF, prepared by former apex court judge L Nageswara Rao, in September, it was believed that a solution amenable to all concerned parties would finally be arrived at. However, no such thing happened.

WOMEN, JUNIORS SHINE

However, the women's national teams and the junior squads have impressed with their performances, raising hopes of a better future. In Chiang Mai, Thailand in July, the women's team scripted history by qualifying directly for the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026, a feat never achieved before.

Up against regional heavyweights and hosts Thailand in the final, the Indian women rode on Sangita Basfore's brilliant brace to emerge winners. The achievement reminded one of former AIFF president Praful Patel's old statement that chances of the Indian women's team playing in a FIFA World Cup before their male counterparts are higher.

As far as the junior teams were concerned, the India squad lifted its seventh SAFF U-17 Championship title in Sri Lanka, edging out Bangladesh in a dramatic final that went to penalties after a 2–2 stalemate.
—PTI

SALAR سالار

Discovery from Tamil Nadu provides insight into the sun

Daily solar observations gathered for years at the century-old Kodaikanal Solar Observatory have led to a breakthrough understanding of how the Sun's magnetic activity varies across its latitudes -- a discovery that could deepen insights into the solar dynamo, impact space-weather forecasting, and even help climate models.

The study, led by researchers from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA), an autonomous body under the Department of Science and Technology (DST), analysed 11 years (2015–2025) of spectroscopic data captured in the calcium-K line of sunlight -- a spectral signature that forms high in the Sun's chromosphere and serves as a sensitive marker of magnetic activity.

"All the studies on the Sun are ultimately essential to understand the space weather, which has direct consequences on the Earth. So, the more we understand, the better prepared we can be for possible disruptions to catastrophes," Apoorva Srinivasa, one of the authors of the study, said.

The Kodaikanal Solar Observatory, which recently celebrated 125 years of continuous observation, maintains one of the world's longest solar datasets, he added.

The research team used this rich archive to track how the Sun's magnetic intensity changes across latitudes -- revealing consistent zones of heightened activity that correspond with the Sun's well-known 11-year cycle of sunspot peaks, he said.

"The Sun is not a static ball of fire, but a magnetically active star that follows large-scale cycles of activity," said KP Raju, lead author of the study.

"By slicing the Sun into latitude bands and analysing integrated light from each, we can reveal patterns invisible when studying isolated features like sunspots," added the former IIA professor.

The team found that most magnetic activity clusters between 40 degrees north and south latitude, with pronounced peaks around 15 degrees to 20 degrees, matching zones where sunspots are most frequent.

"These spectral variations directly mirror how the Sun's magnetic field evolves," said co-author K Nagarju and associate professor at IIA. "We verified this correlation using data from NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory."

They also observed hemispheric asymmetries -- with the southern hemisphere generally showing stronger or faster variations in activity -- providing new hints about how the internal magnetic field reorganises itself over each solar cycle.

The findings were published in the journal, 'Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society' and represent a step toward refining solar dynamo models, which explain how magnetic energy is generated and cycles through the Sun's surface layers.

Srinivasa, who was interning at IIA when he began to study the datasets, and who is currently a PhD scholar at Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham in Coimbatore, said the work on Kodaikanal data opened up several new research paths -- including the possible use of machine learning in solar studies.

"I wanted to see whether we could apply machine learning to predict solar activity trends," he said. "But after a lot of discussion and reading, it became clear that we didn't yet have enough data to train such models meaningfully."

That realisation led him to investigate full-disk images of the Sun -- large photographic archives from India's Kodaikanal and Coronal Solar Observatory, which hold more than a century of observations in the calcium-K and H-alpha wavelengths.

"I wanted a dataset that was much more extensive if I were ever to apply AI-based methods," Apoorva explained.

However, the shift to image-based research brought its own challenges. "These images were captured on photographic plates over the past century and later digitised. Many of them have streaks, hairs, fingerprints -- even issues of poor illumination or contrast," he said. "So before analysing them, I had to test and balance different image-cleaning methodologies developed over decades to create one that could work for my specific problem."

Srinivasa's current focus is on tracking chromospheric features such as filaments, plages, and network regions -- and studying how their size, position, and intensity have changed through the decades.

Going forward, the researcher hopes to connect the spectroscopic dataset (1984–2024) used in the latest study with the full-disk image set (1904–2004).

"By combining these archives -- and possibly adding data from other observatories -- we should be able to see how spectral and physical features match and vary together across more than a century," Srinivasa said.

Researchers said such continuity of data is rare and gives India's scientific community an exceptional edge in global solar research.

Apart from Raju, Nagarju, and Srinivasa, other authors of the study are Anu Sreedevi of IIT-BHU, Narayanankutty Karuppath of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, and P Devendran, T Ramesh Kumar, and P Kumaravel of IIA.
—PTI

The century-old Kodaikanal Solar Observatory maintains one of the world's longest solar datasets
PHOTO: ANI

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Uncut 'Sholay' brings back big screen magic, giving fans closure

To watch Gabbar stride menacingly mouthing "kitne aadmi the", Jai-Veeru bash up baddies atop a train careening through the countryside and an anguished Thakur's thirst for revenge on a big screen is to revisit the magic of the movies – and of 'Sholay' itself.

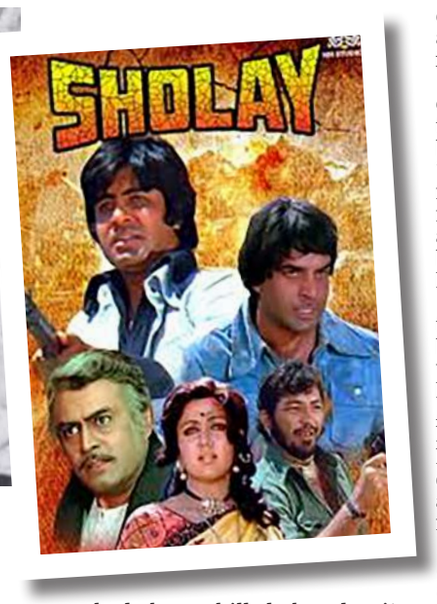
The epic Ramesh Sippy film is back. Not on your TV screen but in a hall, where the action unfolds in a darkened auditorium with little to distract. It's an uncut version with scenes not seen before and a different ending where Thakur Baldev Singh, played with great restraint by Sanjeev Kumar, doesn't spare the life of Gabbar Singh, an explosive debut by Amjad Khan, but kills him.

Fifty years after it first released, there is something for everybody. Still. So, a large family group of 15, ranging from 70 to 7, took in the 70 mm experience earlier this week, each enjoying it in their own way. The grandfather reliving once again the theatre experience, the father who had watched it only on the TV screen earlier and the youngster who didn't know what the film was all about but heard about it from his elders.

Every Indian family has their own 'Sholay' moment. And this one was clearly no different.

Abhishek Bachchan recently spoke for all millennials when he said it was his lifelong dream to watch "Sholay", starring his father Amitabh, Dharmendra, Sanjeev Kumar, Amjad Khan, on the big screen.

In one scene that the Censor Board removed from the original 'Sholay' 50 years ago, Gabbar, played by Amjad Khan, pokes the eye out of a man
PHOTO: X



While the silent generation (born 1928-45), baby boomers (1946-64) and the generation X (1965-1980) got the chance to watch it in theatres and witnessed the 'Sholay' mania unfold, millennials only grew up hearing stories about the film and saw it repeatedly on TV/VHS/DVD.

As the movie plays out in theatres, there are the expected sights – the smile fixed as it were when the RD Burman's guitar dominant casting score plays out, the dread while watching Gabbar Singh ask "woh do aur tum teen", the moist eyes at Jai's death.

But there is more.

Rewatching the film, termed a curry western, is also about nostalgia. When the sound of azaan is heard in the background as matter of fact routine, when Holi is celebrated by all, when a syncretic village society lives its everyday life with its daily struggles, its fabric whole and intact.

The original climax was changed at the censor board's insistence during the Emergency-era when it was released for the first time on 15 August, 1975. The climax of the movie then saw Thakur hand over Gabbar to the police as it was felt by the authorities of the time that a former cop cannot be shown taking law in his own hands (pun intended).

But it also left many, who otherwise felt it was a perfect film, with the feeling that something was amiss as here was a man whose entire family had been killed by dacoit Gabbar Singh and he handed him over to the police instead of killing him.

All those who had that feeling now have closure with the original ending playing out on the silver screen in which Thakur kills Gabbar and then has an emotional outburst after exacting revenge.

Another feature of the rerun, which has been somewhat hit by the 'Dhurandhar' storm, is the multiple generation audience, mouthing dialogues, clapping at the cinematic highs and whistling when their favourite character turns up.

In the darkness of the theatres, one can hear people repeating the punchy dialogues that have become part of the discourse – "keemat jo tum chaho, kaam jo main chahu", "Kya karu mausi mera to dil hi kuch aisa hai" and "Woh do aur tum teen phir bhi wapas aa gaye, woh bhi khaali haath".

'Sholay' aficionados pick out the few extra scenes that have been added in the uncut version. There is the brutal killing of Imam Sahib's son Ahmed, Thakur getting nails hammered into his shoes and a horse-borne Veeru brutally dragging one of the dacoits with a rope are the scenes that had not been seen earlier.

Though these scenes are just a few seconds long, many in the audience are quick to identify them. Such is the craze of the film.

The greatness of the film can also be judged by the fact that the smallest of characters are remembered. Who can forget Sambha (Mac Mohan), who has just one dialogue in the film – poore pachaas hazaar – or Hariram Nai (Keshto Mukherjee), Imam Sahab (AK Hangal) and Kalia (Viju Khote).

"I stopped watching movies long back but returned for 'Sholay' as it is the greatest movie ever made in India. I wanted to watch it with my two grandchildren who are eight and 11," Mohammad Tariq Kamal, 79, said.

He saw it seven times in the theatre when it released in 1975, and watched it now with 15 members of his family – three generations in tow.

"I have told so many stories to my children and grandchildren about 'Sholay'," he said.

"This movie is all inclusive. It has something for the elderly, something for the youth and something for the kids. It has comedy, action, drama, tragedy, what else can a film have? It is a complete film," added an 87-year-old wheeled into the theatre on a wheelchair.

As people wait for the doors of cinema halls to open, the conversations have a common thread. People can be heard narrating a 'Sholay' anecdote or how many times they have watched.

One can even hear pop quizzes and "Sholay" trivia being thrown about – Who is Gabbar Singh's father? What is the registration number of the motorcycle Jai and Veeru drive in the iconic 'Yeh dosti' song?

Though it is a revenge drama, it connects socially with every Indian.

When a dying Jai asks Veeru, "Ye kahani toh nahi bhoolega na", the audience has a ready answer. "Nahin". For 50 years and counting.
—PTI

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Don backs Bruce in NY Guv race after Stefanik's exit

WEST PALM BEACH, 21 DEC

President Donald Trump on Saturday announced he's endorsing Nassau County's Republican executive for governor in next fall's New York race, just a day after the president's ally Rep Elise Stefanik announced she was suspending her candidacy. The endorsement could ensure that Bruce Blakeman, who leads the suburban county on Long Island, doesn't face a serious contender in his attempt to win the GOP primary, and a chance to take on incumbent Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul. "Bruce is MAGA all the way, and has been with me from the very beginning," Trump said in a post on Truth Social. Stefanik announced Friday that she is suspending her campaign and will not seek re-election to the Congress. — *PTI*

Israel approves 19 settlements in West Bank

TEL AVIV, 21 DEC

Israel's Cabinet on Sunday approved a proposal for 19 new settlements in the occupied West Bank, Bezalel Smotrich, the far-right finance minister said. The settlements include two that were previously evacuated during a 2005 disengagement plan, according to Finance Minister Betzalel Smotrich, who has pushed a settlement expansion agenda in the West Bank. It brings the total number of new settlements over the past two years to 69, Smotrich said. The approval increases the number of settlements in the West Bank by nearly 50 per cent during the current government's tenure, from 141 in 2022 to 210, , according to Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog group. Settlements are widely considered illegal under international law. —*PTI*

US bats for 3-way talks for Ukraine deal

KYIV/MIAMI, 21 DEC

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed cautious optimism regarding a proposed trilateral framework for peace talks involving Ukraine, the United States, and Russia. Speaking to reporters in Kyiv, he stated, "They proposed this format as far as I understand: Ukraine, America, Russia," but emphasised that clarity from earlier discussions between Ukraine and its partners was essential before proceeding. Zelenskyy acknowledged previous formats, like the Istanbul talks, had yielded limited results, saying, "I am not sure something new would come of that."

Negotiators from Russia and the United States met in Miami, where Kirill Dmitriev, a Kremlin envoy, described the talks as "constructive" and ongoing. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio noted, "Progress has been made, but significant differences remain." Trump's envoys have been developing a 20-point peace plan, but key disputes over territorial issues and security guarantees persist.

Zelenskyy highlighted critical issues for Ukraine, including territorial status and security guarantees, adding that the possibility of trilateral talks depended on the outcome of US-Russian negotiations. —*Agencies*

9 killed, 10 hurt in S Africa shooting

This is the 2nd pub shooting in a month

JOHANNESBURG, 21 DEC

- About 12 unknown suspects in a white mini-bus and a silver sedan opened fire at pub patrons at KwaNoxolo tavern. Police say some of the victims were randomly shot

Nine people have died, and at least 10 others were wounded after a group of gunmen carried out a shooting at a South African pub during the early hours of Sunday, authorities said.

The incident occurred just before 1 am in the township of Bekkersdal, which is located 46km west of Johannesburg. It is the second mass shooting to happen in South Africa in three weeks.

About 12 unknown suspects in a white mini-bus and a silver sedan opened fire at pub patrons at KwaNoxolo tavern, in the Tambo section of Bekkersdal and continued to shoot randomly as they fled the scene, according to police.

"Some victims were randomly shot in the streets by unknown gunmen," the police said of the incident that left nine people dead and 10 hospitalised.

Provincial police commissioner Maj Gen. Fred Kekana told SABC television that one of the deceased was a driver from an online car-hailing service who had been outside the pub. A manhunt for the suspects event has been initiated.

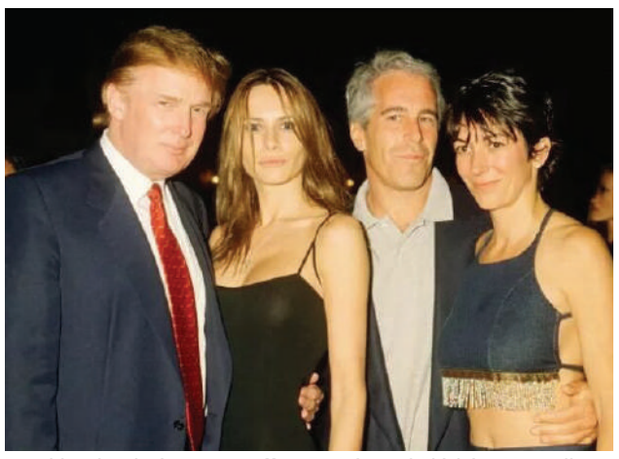
There have been several mass shootings at bars — sometimes called shebeens or taverns in South Africa — in recent years, including a mass shooting carried out by multiple suspects in an unlicensed bar near the South African capital that left at least 12 people dead and 13 injured earlier this month.

Another shooting killed 16 people in the Johannesburg township of Soweto in 2022. On the same day, four people were killed in a mass shooting at a bar in another province.

With almost 26,000 homicides in 2024, or more than 70 per day on average, South Africa has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Firearms are by far the leading cause of death in homicides. Although the nation of 62 million has comparatively stringent gun control laws, officials say many murders are carried out using illegal firearms. —*PTI*

South African police gather at the scene of a mass shooting where gunmen killed nine and injured at least 10 in a pub in Bekkersdal, South Africa, on Sunday **PHOTO: PTI**

16 Epstein files, including Don's pic, disappear from govt site



Donald and Melania Trump, Jeffrey Epstein, and Ghislaine Maxwell photographed together in a now deleted file **PHOTO: X**

NEW YORK, 21 DEC

At least 16 files disappeared from the Justice Department's public webpage under documents related to convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein — including a photograph showing President Donald Trump — less than a day after they were posted, with no explanation from the government and no notice to the public.

The missing files, which were available Friday and no longer accessible, included images of paintings depicting nude women, and a series of photographs along a credenza and in drawers.

In that image, inside a drawer among other photos, was a photograph of Trump, alongside Epstein, Melania Trump and Epstein's longtime associate Ghislaine Maxwell.

The Justice Department did not say why the files were removed or whether their disappearance was intentional.

Democrats on the House Oversight Committee pointed to the missing image featuring a Trump photo in a post on X, writing: "What else is being covered up? We need transparency for the American public."

This has the deepened concerns that had already emerged from the Justice Department's document release. The tens of thousands of heavily redacted pages made public offered little new insight into Epstein's crimes or the prosecutorial decisions. —*PTI*

Bibi to brief Don on Iran strikes: Report

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to brief US President Donald Trump on Iran's alleged expansion of ballistic missile program and the necessity to take action when they meet on 28 December, NBC reported. Israeli officials are worried that Iran is expanding its ballistic missile program, damaged by Israeli strikes earlier this year. There are concerns over Iran reconstituting nuclear enrichment sites bombed by the US in June. While Israel has publicly called Iran's nuclear program an existential threat, officials in the report said that the ballistic missiles were seen by Jerusalem as a more pressing concern. Iran and Israel engaged in a twelve day long war in June where at least 1,000 people were killed. —*Agencies*

US INTERCEPTS MERCHANT VESSEL NEAR VENEZUELA

WASHINGTON, 21 DEC

US forces on Saturday stopped a vessel off the coast of Venezuela for the second time in two weeks, as President Donald Trump continues to ramp up pressure on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

The move, which was confirmed by two US officials familiar with the matter, comes days after Trump announced a "blockade" of all sanctioned oil tankers coming in and out of the South American country and follows the 10 December seizure by American forces of an oil tanker off Venezuela's coast.

The officials were not authorised to discuss publicly about the operation and spoke on condition of anonymity. They described it as a "consented boarding," with the tanker stopping voluntarily and allowing US forces to board it, one official said. —*PTI*

Imran calls for stir over 17-year jail term

ISLAMABAD, 21 DEC

- ""I have sent a message to Sohail Afridi to prepare for a street movement. The nation will have to rise for its rights," Imran Khan allegedly said.

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan urged supporters to gear up for countrywide protests after he and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to a 17-year jail term in a corruption case.

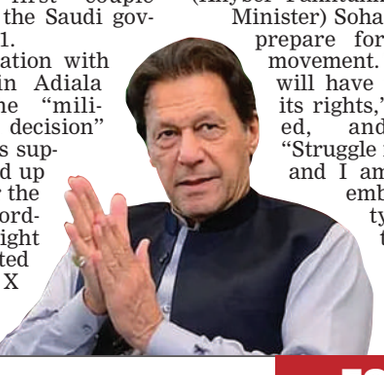
Khan and his wife were sentenced to in jail by a court on Saturday in the Toshakhana 2 corruption case.

Khan, 73, faces multiple cases after his removal from power in April 2022. The Toshakhana 2 case involves alleged fraud in state gifts that the former first couple received from the Saudi government in 2021.

In a conversation with his lawyers in Adiala Jail after the "military-style trial decision" Khan urged his supporters to stand up in protest after the decision, according to a midnight statement posted on Khan's X account.

It is not known who posted this conversation on his personal account, as Khan has no access to social media in jail.

"I have sent a message to (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister) Sohail Afridi to prepare for a street movement. The nation will have to rise for its rights," he stateted, and added, "Struggle is worship, and I am ready to embrace martyrdom for the true freedom of Pakistan. — *PTI*



Iraq's political future uncertain after split vote

BAGHDAD, 21 DEC

Political factions begun negotiations to form a new government after an election produced no clear majority, raising the prospect of a political stalemate.

Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani emerged with the largest number of seats, but his Coalition won only 46, leaving him dependent on alliances. Although backed by the Iran-aligned Coordination Framework in 2022, the bloc is unlikely to support a second term. Shiite parties secured the largest share of seats, strengthened by the boycott of the Sadrist movement, while militia-linked groups gained more than 100 seats.

The next government will inherit a fragile economy, heavy public debt and growing political power of armed factions. Managing Iran-backed militias and balancing pressure from both Tehran and Washington will be among its challenges. — *PTI*

Security has been strengthened to ensure that 'no third party can exploit the situation', said Additional Deputy Commissioner (Media) of the Sylhet Metropolitan Police Saiful Islam **PHOTO: X**

Security beefed up near Indian mission, visa centre amid Bangladesh protest

DHAKA, 21 DEC

Security has been strengthened at the Indian Assistant High Commission office and the visa application centre in Sylhet after tensions increased after the death of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi, officials said.

The enhanced security was put in place to ensure that "no third party can exploit the situation," Additional Deputy Commissioner (Media) of the Sylhet Metropolitan Police Saiful Islam was quotedin 'The Dhaka Tribune'.

Police said security was reinforced from Friday at the Assistant High Commission office located in the Upashahar area, the residence of the Assistant High Commissioner in the same locality, and the visa application centre in the Shobhanighat area.

After the death of Inqilab Mancha spokesperson Hadi on Thursday, Gano Odhikar Parishad had announced a move to besiege the Assistant High Commission office.

"Inqilab Mancha had staged a sit-in in front of the Sylhet Central Shaheed Minar, protesting Hadi's killing and raising slogans against what they described as Indian dominance," the report said.

Hadi, a prominent leader of the student-led protests last year that led to the ouster of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government, was a candidate for the 12 February general elections. —*PTI*

FOR NON-MUSLIMS

Saudi expands access to its only alcohol store

RIYADH, 21 DEC

Saudi Arabia has quietly expanded access to its only store that sells alcohol, allowing wealthy foreign residents to buy booze in the latest step in the once ultraconservative kingdom's experiment in liberalisation.

There's been no official announcement of the decision, but word has gotten out, and long lines of cars and people can now be seen at the discreet, unmarked store in the Diplomatic Quarter of capital Riyadh.

The store opened in January 2024 for non-Muslim diplomats. The new rules allow non-Muslim foreigners who hold Premium Residency to buy. The residency permit goes to foreigners with specialised skills, investors and entrepreneurs.

Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam, has banned alcohol since the early 1950s. The store is widely seen as a way to cautiously test the controlled sale of alcohol.

Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and his father, King Salman, have pursued a dramatic liberalisation policy in the kingdom, aiming to attract tourism, boost international business and reduce economic dependence on crude oil.

The kingdom, which adheres to Islamic Sharia law, has opened movie theatres, allowed women to drive and hosted major music festivals. But political speech and dissent remain strictly criminalised, potentially at the penalty of death.

Alcohol remains banned for the general public. The unmarked store resembles a duty-free shop. Its ownership remains officially undisclosed.

Security is strict. Every visitor is subject to eligibility checks and frisking before entry. Phones and cameras are banned inside, and staff even inspect eyewear for smart glasses.

Prices are sharply elevated, customers said. The customers described the store as relatively well-stocked, though some said the selection of beer and wine was limited.

Saudis and other residents who want a drink often travel to the neighbouring island of Bahrain, where alcohol is legally available to Muslims and non-Muslims. The more expensive option is to go to Dubai in the UAE. —*PTI*

Saudi Arabia is experimenting with alcohol sales **PHOTO: FREEPIK**

- Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam, has banned alcohol since the early 1950s. The store is widely seen as a way to cautiously test the controlled sale of alcohol

Australia observes a National Day of Reflection for the victims and survivors of last week's Bondi Beach shooting **PHOTO: PTI**

Australia commemorates Bondi shooting victims

MELBOURNE, 21 DEC

Australians lit candles at 6.47pm on Sunday to commemorate the first shots made a week earlier at Sydney's Bondi Beach in an attack on a Jewish festival that left 15 dead.

The federal and New South Wales state governments have declared Sunday a national Day of Reflection. A traditional smoking ceremony held on Sunday morning at the waterfront Bondi Pavilion, where an impromptu memorial has grown over the past week as flowers and heartfelt messages have accumulated. Rabbi Levi Wolff expects thousands would gather at Bondi to show solidarity for the Jewish community.

"Australians appreciate that this is an attack that wasn't just against the Jewish people but this is an attack on Australian values and they will come here and stand together with us shoulder-to-shoulder to tell the people that there violence has no place in our beautiful country," Wolff told reporters at the memorial. —*PTI*

Navi Mumbai airport to offer free & fast Wi-Fi

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Adani Group's Navi Mumbai International Airport Ltd (NMIAL) will launch a digital-first passenger communication system supported by free high-speed Wi-Fi when the airport starts commercial operations on 25 December. Passengers connecting to the Wi-Fi will receive real-time updates through the Adani OneApp, which will act as a virtual assistant providing flight status alerts, boarding gate details, schedules and other notifications directly on mobile phones. The app will also share information on food outlets, retail stores and lounges, reducing dependence on information counters and display boards. The airport will offer free Wi-Fi speeds of up to 10 Mbps and has partnered with BSNL to provide mobile voice and data services.

NMIA will open in phases, with an initial capacity of 20 million passengers annually —*PTI*

IN-SPACe to set up 7 space labs in institutions

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

India's space sector regulator INSPACe has proposed setting up 'Antariksh Prayogshala' at seven academic institutions to strengthen the country's space technology ecosystem. The initiative aims to establish advanced space laboratories within universities to provide hands-on training and practical exposure to students. INSPACe has issued a Request for Proposal, with institutions to be selected from seven different zones across the country. Eligible institutes must be at least five years old, ranked within the top 200 of the NIRF, and offer space technology courses. INSPACe will provide financial support of up to 75 per cent of the project cost, capped at Rs 5 crore per institution. The labs are expected to boost industry-academia collaboration and support India's expanding private space sector. —*PTI*

Experts see coal use dropping by 2047

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Coal's share in India's energy mix is projected to fall to 30–35 per cent by 2047, but its responsible use will remain vital, experts said. Coal currently generates about 70 per cent of India's electricity, with output exceeding one billion tonnes in FY25. Former Coal India chairman PM Prasad said the priority over the next few decades must be reducing emissions and adopting best practices, even as coal's role declines. He noted that technologies promoted by Future Coal could cut emissions by up to 99 per cent, while replicating strong environmental standards across mines could reduce dust and pollutants by 20–30 per cent. Experts stressed that rising energy demand means coal must be used more efficiently and sustainably. —*PTI*

4 booked for Rs 22 cr GST scam

THANE, 21 DEC

A case has been registered against four persons in Maharashtra's Thane district for allegedly creating fake GST-registered firms and fraudulently claiming input tax credit worth over Rs 22.06 crore, police said on Sunday. The Kalyan police filed the case on Thursday following a complaint by the State Goods and Services Tax (SGST) department. The accused have been identified as Nikhil Gaikwad, owner of Dynamic Enterprises, Noor Mohammad Vasim Pinjari, Navnath Sukrya Gharat and an individual named Sarfaraj, along with others. Police said the accused submitted forged documents between April and August to obtain GST registrations. They allegedly set up eight bogus companies to claim the ITC illegally. —*PTI*

New Bill seeks to end SEBI's regulatory overhang

It mulls an 8-yr limit on inspections & investigations by the body

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The Securities Markets Code (SMC) Bill defines clear limits on Sebi's enforcement powers by introducing an eight-year statutory cap on inspections and investigations, aimed at reducing prolonged regulatory uncertainty for market participants. The provision aims to provide greater legal certainty to market participants, particularly in cases where regulatory proceedings have dragged on for years.

Introduced in the Lok Sabha last week, the Bill also establishes a time-bound enforcement framework, requiring Sebi to complete investigations within 180 days, while enhancing investor protection through an Ombudsperson-led grievance redressal mechanism. The Bill further mandates Sebi to allocate 25 per cent of its annual surplus to a Reserve Fund, with the balance transferred to the Consolidated Fund of India. The Bill bars Sebi from ordering inspections or investigations for actions that occurred more than eight years earlier..

The Bill, which has been referred to a Standing Committee for further consultation, seeks to consolidate, rationalise and replace three existing securities laws -- the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956; the Sebi Act, 1992; and the Depositories Act, 1996.

Separately, the Bill also introduced changes to Sebi's financial framework. It requires the regulator to set up a Reserve Fund, into which 25 per cent of its annual surplus from the General Fund will be transferred, to be used exclusively for meeting Sebi's expenses. Any remaining surplus will have to be transferred to the Consolidated Fund of India.

According to estimates, Sebi's General Fund currently stands at Rs 3,000-4,000 crore. —*PTI*

INDIA–US EXPORTS SLIDE, SEE PARTIAL REBOUND: GTRI

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

India's exports to the US fell sharply between May and September 2025 before partially recovering by November, according to trade-focused think-tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI). Exports declined 37.7 per cent from $8.8 billion in May to a low of $5.5 billion in September, before rebounding 27.3 per cent to $7.0 billion in November, still down 20.7 per cent from May levels.

GTRI said nearly 85% of November exports came from sectors that initially declined. Gems and jewellery exports, for example, fell from $500.2 million in May to $202.8 million in September before recovering to $406.2 million in November, with similar trends seen across electronics, machinery, autos, pharmaceuticals, textiles, chemicals, plastics, rubber, fuels and agri-products.

Exports fell between May and September despite relatively low tariffs — 10 per cent from May to July, 25 per cent through most of August, and 50% only in the final days. September, the first full month under the 50 per cent tariff, marked the low point. Exports partly recovered between September and November,

Bengaluru's Digantara ventures into space missile tracking

BENGALURU, 21 DEC

Indian space startup Digantara, best known for monitoring space debris, has expanded into satellite-based missile tracking, citing growing global demand from governments for early-warning and surveillance capabilities.

The Bengaluru-based firm has leveraged its experience in tracking fast-moving objects in space to develop systems capable of detecting and monitoring missiles from orbit, its co-founder and chief executive Anirudh Sharma said. Space debris and traffic monitoring has become a critical segment of the global space economy as satellite launches in low Earth orbit accelerate.

Digantara currently operates SCOT, a commercial space-surveillance satellite launched in January 2025, and plans to deploy 15 more satellites in 2026–27 to strengthen its monitoring network. It also intends to launch two Albatross satellites during the same period, dedicated to early missile warning and precision tracking, along with Skygate, a growing network of ground-based sensors.

These assets are integrated through the company's infrastructure platform, AIRA, which combines space- and ground-based hardware, data and processing systems to enable near real-time detection and interpretation of emerging threats.

The startup has also begun operations in the US, focusing on building larger, 100-kg-class satellites tailored to American defence requirements. Sharma said a dedicated US office in Colorado Springs was essential to qualify for contracts from the US Department of Defence. —*PTI*

FROM WHEELCHAIR TO SPACE

German engineer Michaela Benthaus, paralysed in a mountain bike accident seven years ago, became the first wheelchair user in space on Saturday. She left her wheelchair behind to float while admiring Earth aboard Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin's New Shepard, accompanied by five passengers, including retired SpaceX executive Hans Koenigsmann. The 10-minute, 105km flight needed minimal adjustments, as the autonomous capsule is designed for accessibility. Benthaus called it 'the coolest experience', and even attempted to float upside down

PHOTO: BLUE ORIGIN

TCS BIGGEST WINNER

Mcap of 6 of top-10 firms climbs ₹ 75,257 cr

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

The combined market valuation of six of the top-10 most-valued firms climbed Rs 75,256.97 crore last week, with Tata Consultancy Services and Infosys emerging as the biggest winners.

Last week, the BSE benchmark declined 338.3 points, or 0.39 per cent.

While Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), State Bank of India, Infosys, and Larsen & Toubro were the gainers, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Bajaj Finance, and Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) faced erosion from their valuation.

The market valuation of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) jumped Rs 22,594.96 crore to Rs 11,87,673.41 crore.

Infosys added Rs 16,971.64 crore taking its valuation to Rs 6,81,192.22 crore.

The valuation of State Bank of India climbed Rs 15,922.81 crore to Rs 9,04,738.98 crore and that of Reliance Industries edged higher by Rs 12,314.55 crore to Rs 21,17,967.29 crore.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of Bharti Airtel advanced Rs 7,384.23 crore to Rs 11,95,332.34 crore and that of Larsen & Toubro went up Rs 68.78 crore to Rs 5,60,439.16 crore.

However, the mcap of HDFC Bank tumbled Rs 21,920.08 crore to Rs 15,16,638.63 crore.

The valuation of LIC eroded by Rs 9,614 crore to Rs 5,39,206.05 crore.

ICICI Bank's mcap declined by Rs 8,427.61 crore to Rs 9,68,240.54 crore.—*PTI*

MKTS TO BE RANGE-BOUND IN HOLIDAY-SHORTENED WEEK

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Indian equity markets are expected to trade in a range-bound manner in the holiday-shortened week, with investor sentiment guided by foreign fund flows, currency movement and global macroeconomic cues, analysts said. Trading volumes may remain subdued as several global markets observe Christmas and New Year holidays, while domestic markets will be closed on Thursday.

Investors will track infrastructure output, bank credit and deposit growth, foreign exchange reserves, crude oil prices and US economic data, including GDP and core PCE inflation. While domestic liquidity provides support, renewed foreign inflows could lift sentiment. Markets ended last week lower, though a late recovery limited loss..

NEW INVESTOR ADDITIONS FALL BY 11.6% IN NOV: NSE

MUMBAI, 21 DEC

New investor additions in equity markets fell 11.6 per cent month-on-month in November, with 13.2 lakh investors joining, taking the registered base to 12.3 crore, an NSE report said. After two months of growth, onboarding momentum cooled amid global uncertainty.

In 2025, the investor base took nine months to rise from 11 crore to 12 crore, compared with five–six months earlier. Average monthly additions fell to 12.8 lakh from 19.3 lakh last year. North India led participation. —*ANI*

TITAN AIMS FOR $1B WATCH SALES IN JUST 2 YEARS

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Titan expects its watch and wearable business to cross USD 1 billion in sales by FY27, after clocking a 16 per cent CAGR over the past four to five years, driven by a sharper focus on mid-premium and premium analogue watches. CEO Kuruvilla Markose said the segment grew over 17 per cent to 4,576 crore in FY25, calling it a defining year.

The company is expanding Helios and Helios Luxe, with premium and luxury segments seen growing over 30 per cent. Titan currently runs 282 Helios stores and five Helios Luxe outlets, planning 20 more by FY26 and 40 by FY27. While smartwatches remain relevant, analogue watches are growing faster, aided by consumer upgrades to branded products. —*PTI*

Inox Clean acquires Vibrant Energy for ₹5K cr

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Inox Clean Energy Ltd, part of Noida-based INOXGFL Group, has agreed with Australia's Macquarie Corporate Holdings and other shareholders to acquire Vibrant Energy, a 1,337 MW renewable energy IPP in India, in a deal valued at around Rs 5,000 crore, industry sources said.

The projects are located across multiple states, including Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

INOXGFL Group Executive Director Devansh Jain said in a statement, "The acquisition will aid Inox Clean's journey to scale up its renewable power generation capacity. With this and other acquisitions nearing closure, Inox Clean is on course to reach its targeted RE installed capacity of 3 GW by FY26-end, making it the fastest company to do so." —*PTI*

'Agentic AI will run firms by 2026; take over IT, HR and finance'

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

Wipro Chief Technology Officer Sandhya Arun said that the global technology landscape is set to undergo a decisive shift by 2026, moving from isolated experiments to the era of Agentic AI, where networks of autonomous agents manage complex business workflows. "Enterprises are moving from isolated agentic AI experiments to pragmatic, enterprise-wide strategies focused on measurable business outcomes," Arun said, noting that by 2026, networks of collaborating AI agents are expected to manage complex workflows across diverse functions, including IT, HR, finance, marketing, and supply chains.

"We will see a growing shift towards specialised, industry or domain-native models rather than broad, general-purpose ones. These models will be trained on industry-specific datasets and built with contextual intelligence such as ontology, risk controls, safety and regulatory requirements - embedded into the solution from the start. Smaller, focused models will deliver deeper expertise and better accuracy in specific areas, while also being more cost-effective and less resource-intensive," she noted.

Arun also pointed to the emergence of "programmable money" and quantum technology as critical drivers.

She cautioned that for enterprises to thrive in this AI-first world, workforce readiness will become a "C-Suite survival metric," dependent on continuous skilling and effective human-machine collaboration.

Enterprises that invest in people, embed governance into innovation, and reimagine their operating DNA will be best positioned to thrive in an AI-first world, Arun said. —*PTI*

AFTER PAY PACKAGE RULING

Musk becomes 1st person worth $700 billion

SAN FRANCISO, 21 DEC

Elon Musk has become the first person in history to be worth more than $700 billion, according to the Forbes real-time billionaire rankings, following the Delaware Supreme Court's decision to reinstate his controversial Tesla pay package.

The SpaceX and Tesla chief now tops Forbes' list with an estimated net worth exceeding $700 billion, making him richer than the next three technology billionaires combined — Google co-founder Larry Page ($252.6 billion), Oracle founder Larry Ellison ($242.7 billion) and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos ($239.4 billion). Musk's fortune alone exceeds Page's by nearly $500 billion.

Separately, the Bloomberg Billionaires Index pegged Musk's wealth at $642 billion at the time of writing.

The surge follows a ruling on 19 December, when the Delaware Supreme Court reinstated Musk's 2018 Tesla stock options, valued at $139 billion, which had been voided last year. The $56 billion pay package had earlier been struck down in 2024 as "improper and inequitable" after prolonged legal challenges.

Musk had already crossed the $600 billion mark earlier this month amid reports that SpaceX could list publicly. His wealth was further boosted after Tesla shareholders approved an unprecedented $1 trillion pay package in November — the largest corporate compensation plan in history.

Forbes data show Musk added more than $340 billion to his wealth in 2025 alone, exceeding the total net worth of any other billionaire this year —*Agencies*

Dividend is in my blood: Vedanta head amid demerger

NEW DELHI, 21 DEC

"Dividend is in my blood," Vedanta Group chairman Anil Agarwal said, reaffirming commitment to shareholder payouts alongside pursuing the group's planned USD 20 billion expansion across businesses even after the proposed demerger.

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) on Tuesday approved the plan to split Vedanta into five different listed entities. After the demerger, the base metals business will be housed in Vedanta Ltd, while Vedanta Aluminium, Talwandi Sabo Power, Vedanta Steel and Iron and Malco Energy housing oil and gas business will be the other four listed entities.

Agarwal said the demerger is planned to be completed by March 2026.

Outlining growth plans, he said Vedanta has laid out ambitious expansion plans across businesses. It is investing a total of USD 20 billion over the next 4-5 years -- USD 4 billion each in oil and gas and aluminium, USD 2 billion in zinc and silver, USD 2.5 billion in power and the balance in iron ore, steel and other businesses. Agarwal said the demerger was chosen over asset sales. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X/@AO

Kyrgios to make ATP tour return at Brisbane Int'l

SYDNEY, 21 DEC

Nick Kyrgios will compete at next month's Brisbane International after receiving a wildcard entry, organisers said on Sunday, as the former Wimbledon finalist works towards a potential return to the Australian Open. The 30-year-old Australian's career has been ravaged by injury over the last couple of years, and he has played only five singles matches in 2025, the most recent at the Miami Open in March. Kyrgios, the 2018 Brisbane champion, is now ranked 673rd in the world with no protected ranking and will also need a wildcard to compete at Melbourne Park. In the build-up to the season's first Grand Slam, he will play in the Kooyong Classic warm-up exhibition event in Melbourne as well as a battle of the sexes.—*PTI*

Asian Football Confederation to launch AFC League

KUALA LUMPUR, 21 DEC

The Asian Football Confederation announced Sunday it will launch an AFC Nations League to boost competition among its member countries.The move follows UEFA's introduction of a Nations League in 2018, in which European national teams are divided into tiers and play during designated international windows.The announcement comes a day after the Confederation of African Football said it will start a similar tournament in 2029."The effective utilization of the FIFA international match windows has become increasingly challenging due to limited opponent availability, rising operational costs and logistical complexities, often diminishing the sporting value of international fixtures," the AFC said in a statement.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Pak beat India by 191 runs to win U19 Asia Cup final

Pak & India teams continue no-handshake policy after the game

DUBAI, 21 DEC

India faltered against the big-hitting Sameer Minhas and the extra zip of pacers, suffering a massive 191-run defeat against Pakistan in a one-sided 50-over Under-19 Asia Cup final, here Sunday.

Pakistan lifted their second U19 Asia Cup, and as is the norm now, there were no formal greetings between the players of the two teams.

Once Pakistan posted a mammoth 347 for eight, riding on Minhas' 172 (113b, 17x4, 9x6), they needed a lion-hearted chase to clinch a ninth title in the tournament.

But the tall Pakistan pace troika Ali Reza (4/42), Mohammad Sayyam (2/38) and Abdul Subhan (2/29) -- hurried their top-order with consistent hard-lengths as India folded for 156 in 26.2 overs. India skipper Ayush Mhatre said his team played well throughout the tournament, but wayward bowling cost them dear on the crucial day. Pakistan skipper Farhan Yousaf said he "was not disappointed with the final score."

We are very happy with the collective performance. We had lost the first match against India, but our management had a good talk with us, and we could win in the final," Yousaf said. Minhas was adjudged the Player-of-the-Match and also Player-of-the-Series. "It was a good innings.

I had in mind to score a big score. I want to play my natural game. We wanted to bat first, looking at the track. It is very memorable for me," he said. India's chase began on an explosive note despite losing Ayush Mhatre early. Vaibhav Suryavanshi hammered Raza for two sixes and a four to take 21 runs in the first over.

In the first ball of the fifth over, India suffered a body blow with the dismissal of Suryavanshi.

The left-hander went for a full-blooded pick-up shot off Raza, but the good-length ball, which had extra bounce on it, took the edge of the opener's bat and nestled in the gloves of stumper Zahoor Hamza

ACC chief Mohsin Naqvi hands U-19 Asia Cup 2025 medals

Asian Cricket Council (ACC) chairman Mohsin Naqvi awarded the winner's medals and trophy to Pakistan after the final of the Under-19 Asia Cup 2025 against India on Sunday. There was no Indian representative at the trophy presentation. Ayush Mhatre received the runner-up cheque from Mirwais Ashraf, the chairman of the Afghanistan Cricket Board.

No handshake gesture after Asia Cup final

The Indian Under-19 cricket team did not take part in the customary post-match handshake with Pakistan following its 191-run defeat in the final of the U-19 Asia Cup 2025 in Dubai on Sunday. The Ayush Mhatre-led team had skipped the gesture during the two sides' group stage encounter as well. There was also no handshake after the toss during the summit clash. The decision mirrors a recent pattern involving Indian teams in matches against Pakistan. Pakistan 347 for 8 (Minhas 172, Hussain 56, Devendran 3-83) beat India 156 (Devendran 36, Raza 4-42, Ahsan 2-12) by 191 runs. —*PTI*

Sameer Minhas underlines his early promise with a clutch hundred against India PHOTO: PTI

3RD VICTORY IN ADELAIDE

Ashes: Australia seal series win over England

ADELAIDE, 21 DEC

Apparently, the worst Australian cricket team in 15 years just won the Ashes with two matches to spare against the best England squad assembled since 2011.

Long-time protagonist Stuart Broad lit the fuse ahead of a volatile contest for the longest-running rivalry in test cricket when he described the host squad as the worst to contest the Ashes in Australia since England won the 2010-11 series Down Under. The 167-test veteran played two matches for England in that winning series. The architects of the Bazball revolution that England aimed to use to summit test cricket have conceded the preparation wasn't quite right for the Ashes. That's not to say the strategy will be shelved.

Labuschagne, who produced a spectacular catch to help hasten the end of England's dogged last-day comeback in the third test in Adelaide on Sunday, reflected on the pre-series pronouncements by Broad and others.

"Have to say, being called the worst Australian team in 15 years... like it's nice to be sitting where we are, 3-0 up," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. We want to make sure it's 5-0 and really take that urn." It took all of 11 days two in Perth, four in Brisbane, and almost a full five in Adelaide not quite a record for clinching an Ashes series but not too far off.Chasing what needed to be a world record for victory, England was all out for 352 in pursuit of 435, giving Australia an 82-run win. In a post-match TV interview, Head was asked what it's like to be part of the Australian team, and his answer was simple: "Yeah, it's bloody amazing."

Australia 371 and 349 (Head 170, Carey 72, Tongue 4-70) beat England 286 and 352 (Crawley 85, Smith 60, Jacks 47, Starc 3-42, Cummins 3-48, Lyon 3-77) by 82 runs —*PTI*

King gives WI a positive start after Conway and Latham's tons

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 21 DEC

Tom Latham and Devon Conway earned a unique place in test history Sunday when their 192-run second innings partnership paved the way for New Zealand's declaration at 306-2 on the fourth day of the third cricket test against the West Indies.

Latham made the declaration at drinks in the third session with New Zealand leading by 461 runs. New Zealand earlier had bowled out the West Indies for 420 in reply to its score of 575-8, a first innings lead of 155.

Latham and Conway shared a 323-run opening stand in New Zealand's first innings of 587-8 and became the first pair in tests to achieve a triple century and century partnership in the same match.

He took advantage of his opportunityon Sunday to reach 40 not out.

Rachin Ravindra made an unbeaten 46 from 23 balls, rushing as the declaration approached.

In the series, Conway made 0, 37, 60, 28, 22,7 and 100: 452 runs at 75.3. Latham made 24, 145, 11, 9, 13,7 and 101: 427 runs at 71.1. Conway and Latham's partnerships in this test produced 515 runs, more than any opening pair in a single match in all tests.

West Indies 420 (Hodge 123*, King 63, Duffy 4-86) and 43 for 0 (King 37*, Campbell 2*) need another 419 runs to beat New Zealand 575 for 8 dec and 306 for 2 dec (Latham 101, Conway 100, Hodge 2-80) —*PTI*

ANNUAL AWARDS FUNCTION

K'taka Olympics Association felicitates notable sportspersons

BENGALURU, 21 DEC

The Karnataka Olympics Association on Sunday felicitated notable sportspersons, including promising shuttler Ayush Shetty and seasoned tennis player SD Prajwal Dev, from the state as part of the annual KOA awards function.

The 20-year-old Shetty won the US Open Super 300 tournament in June, ending India's title drought in the BWF World Tour. He defeated Brian Yang of Canada 21-18, 21-13 in the men's singles final.

Prajwal was a member of India's Davis Cup squad in 2024.

"I am now eyeing the Bengaluru Open, the Bangkok Challenger, and two tournaments in Vietnam, to start

with, and am quite proud to receive this award," said Prajwal.

Young golfer Pranavi Urs, who last month became the first Indian woman golfer to win a title while competing against men in a mixed field at the IGPL Invitational Mumbai, was also honoured.

Despite her demanding schedule, Pranavi continues to refine her game under Steven Giuliano at the Singapore Golf Club and works on her equipment setup under Malaysian expert Eric Chong.

Apart from the trio, rising shooter Divya TS and hurdler Unnathi Ayyappa, daughter of legendary athlete Pramila Ayyappa, were also felicitated during the function. —*PTI*

Fit India on Cycle celebrates first anniversary

PUDUCHERRY, 21 DEC

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Sunday led the first anniversary celebrations of the 'Fit India Sundays on Cycle' initiative with more than 1,500 participants cycling along the Rock Beach promenade here.Legendary Indian hockey goalkeeper P.R. Sreejesh and table tennis icon Sharath Kamal joined the ride, which saw participation from people across various age groups and backgrounds, including school students, members of NaMo Cycling Clubs, and students from Puducherry University.According to the Sports Ministry, the Fit India Sundays on Cycle initiative was conducted in over 700 districts across 2 lakh locations nationwide.—*PTI*

Pak selector looks to India model for cricket revival

KARACHI, 21 DEC

Senior Pakistan selector and head of the National Cricket Academy, Aaqib Javed, has revealed that he has been following India's success story and has tried to implement it for the betterment of the sport in his country. India has been performing consistently in white-ball cricket, with the team winning the T20 World Cup in the Caribbean last year, the Champions Trophy in Dubai earlier this year, and the Asia Cup in September, defeating Pakistan in the final. "I have looked at India's success and have tried execute plans for the betterment of Pakistan cricket.—*PTI*

Isak injures ankle while scoring for Liverpool

LONDON, 21 DEC

Alexander Isak was helped off the field with an apparent left ankle injury sustained in the act of scoring for Liverpool, just 11 minutes after coming on as a halftime substitute in the 2-1 victory at Tottenham in the Premier League on Saturday.

As British soccer's record signing swept in a left-foot finish to give Liverpool a 1-0 lead in the 56th minute, Micky van de Ven slid in with a challenge that connected with the Sweden striker's ankle.

Isak didn't even celebrate the goal and, after receiving treatment, was carried off the field with the help of Liverpool's medical staff.

Liverpool manager Arne Slot said it was too early to determine the severity of the injury.

"Let's hope he is back with us soon," Slot said. "Difficult to say to you now."

Van de Ven wasn't punished for the foul. Tottenham was already down to 10 men after Xavi Simons was handed a straight red card in the 33rd for a studs-up tackle on fellow Netherlands international Virgil van Dijk, and ended the match with nine men after Cristian Romero's stoppage-time sending-off. —*PTI*

An Se-Young wins BWF World Tour Finals

HANGZHOU, 21 DEC

World No. 1 An Se-Young became the first badminton player to earn over USD 1 million in prize money in a season when she beat Wang Zhi Yi 21-13, 18-21, 21-10 to clinch the BWF World Tour Finals 2025 on Sunday.

Se-Young had already won US$763,175 before the BWF World Tour Finals 2025, and the winner's cheque of USD 240,000 saw her surpass USD 1 million.

In an extremely close summit clash, Se Young sealed the first game 21-13, but Zhi Yi made a comeback in the next game. Se-young had previously lost to Zhi Yi in the semifinals of the same tournament last year.

And the South Korean made sure that history did not repeat itself as she cruised to a 21-10 win, sealing her second World Tour title. Her only other title had come in 2021.

It was her 11th singles title of the year, making her the joint-most successful player in a season, tied with Japanese legend Kento Momota.

The World Tour Finals sees the top eight players in each category based on the total points earned at this year's BWF World Tour Championship compete.

Se-young, who won all three games in the group stage, reached the final with a dominant 2-0 win over Japanese powerhouse Akane Yamaguchi.

Earlier on Thursday, India's top men's doubles pair, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, registered their second successive win at the BWF World Tour Finals 2025, defeating Indonesia's Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Shohibul Fikri in a pulsating three-game contest. —*PTI*

Kane Williamson reveals retirement plans

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 21 DEC

When Kane Williamson leaves the Bay Oval field on Monday at the end of the Black Caps' third Test against the West Indies, he may never don New Zealand whites again.

The Black Caps' finest-ever batter, boasting 9,461 Test runs to his name at an average of 54.7, said on Sunday that he will ask himself whether it's his last Test as his team chases a day five victory in Mount Maunganui.

"As you get to the latter stages (of your career), those thoughts certainly enter your mind," said the 35-year-old. Williamson has not made a concrete decision over his future in Test cricket, but he is leaning more towards family than cricketing commitment.

"It's almost series by series," Williamson said of his commitment to the Black Caps.After the West Indies Test series, there's a pretty large block away from the (Black Caps), and there will be more conversations had. We'll just cross those bridges as they come.—*PTI*

INDIANS SET NAT'L RECORDS

Cheptegei, Azimeraw win World 25K Kolkata

KOLKATA, 21 DEC

Uganda's Joshua Cheptegei underlined his mastery of the distance to win the 10th Tata Steel World 25K Kolkata men's race while India's Gulveer Singh and Seema rewrote the course records in their respective elite categories here on Sunday.

Ethiopia's Degitu Azimeraw produced a clinical performance to dethrone defending champion Sutume Asefa Kebede to win the international elite women's race. Two-time Olympic champion Cheptegei stamped his authority early, dictating the pace from the flag-off and never relinquishing control.

Uganda's 5,000m and 10,000m World Record holder Joshua Cheptegei won the Tata Steel World 25K Marathon PHOTO: PTI

He crossed the line in 1:11:49 to win his maiden title, finishing ahead of Tanzania's Alphonce Felix Siumbu (1:11:56) and Lesotho's Tebello Ramakongoana (1:11:59) in a tightly contested podium finish. "Winning mattered more than the record for me. Coming back to Kolkata and winning is special for me. I have won in Bangalore, and this was a big race with world-class athletes. This victory gives me confidence and positivity as I prepare for my next marathon," Cheptegei said. Running the Kolkata course for the third time, Azimeraw broke away decisively and led from start to finish, clocking 1:19:36 in the women's race. Sutume settled for second in 1:20:28, while Meselech Alemayehu completed an Ethiopian clean sweep in 1:20:48.

"My legs were a little stiff, so I just focused on going strong. But after 10km, my legs got better, and then I continued to build my race and speed, and with that, I won. —*PTI*

SUKHMAN SINGH WINS IGU AMATEUR GOLF EVENT

NEW DELHI, 30 OCT

Noida golfer Sukhman Singh rang in early Christmas celebrations by capturing the Amateur Golf Championship of India here Sunday.

Sukhman posted a dominant performance to defeat Harman Sachdeva of Haryana in the 36-hole final following an unassailable 7UP lead after 29 holes at the Tollygunge Club.It is the world's longest-running amateur matchplay championship organised by the Indian Golf Union (IGU). —*PTI*